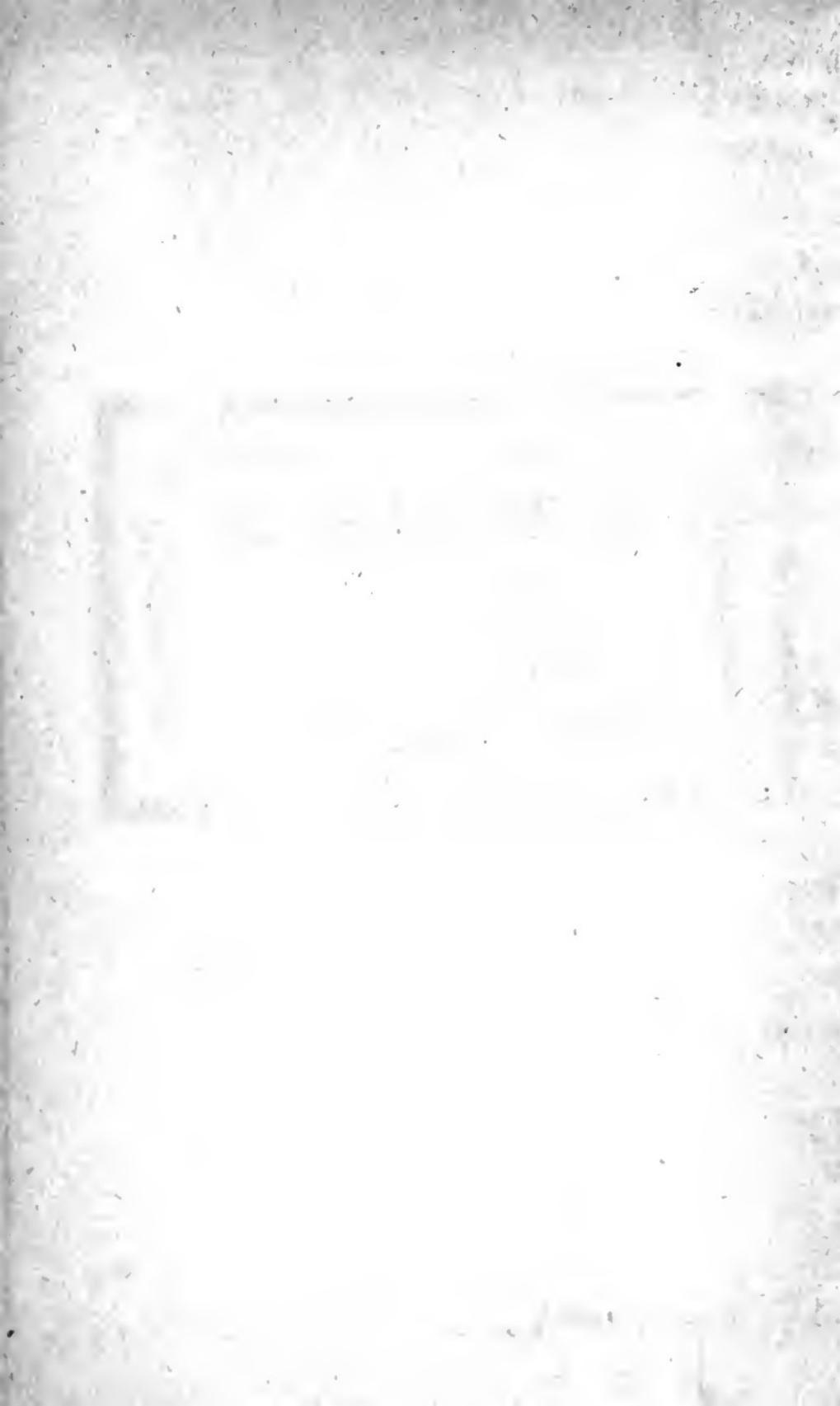
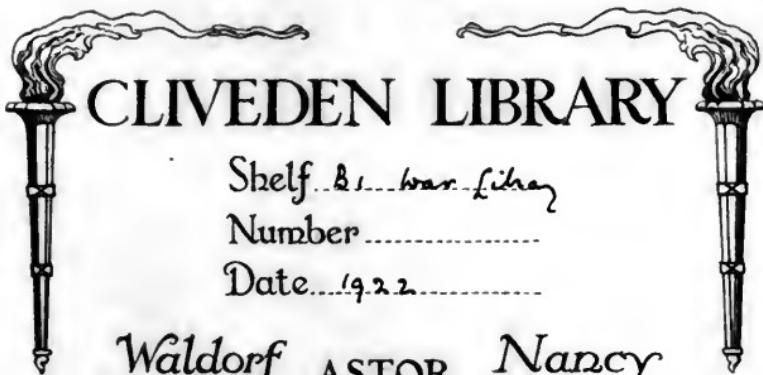


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## A SOLDIER'S PILGRIMAGE

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH  
“LE VOYAGE DU CENTURION”

BY

E. M. WALKER AND M. HARRIET M. CAPES

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*Photo by Henri Manuel*

ERNEST PSICHARI

# A SOLDIER'S PILGRIMAGE

BY

ERNEST PSICHARI

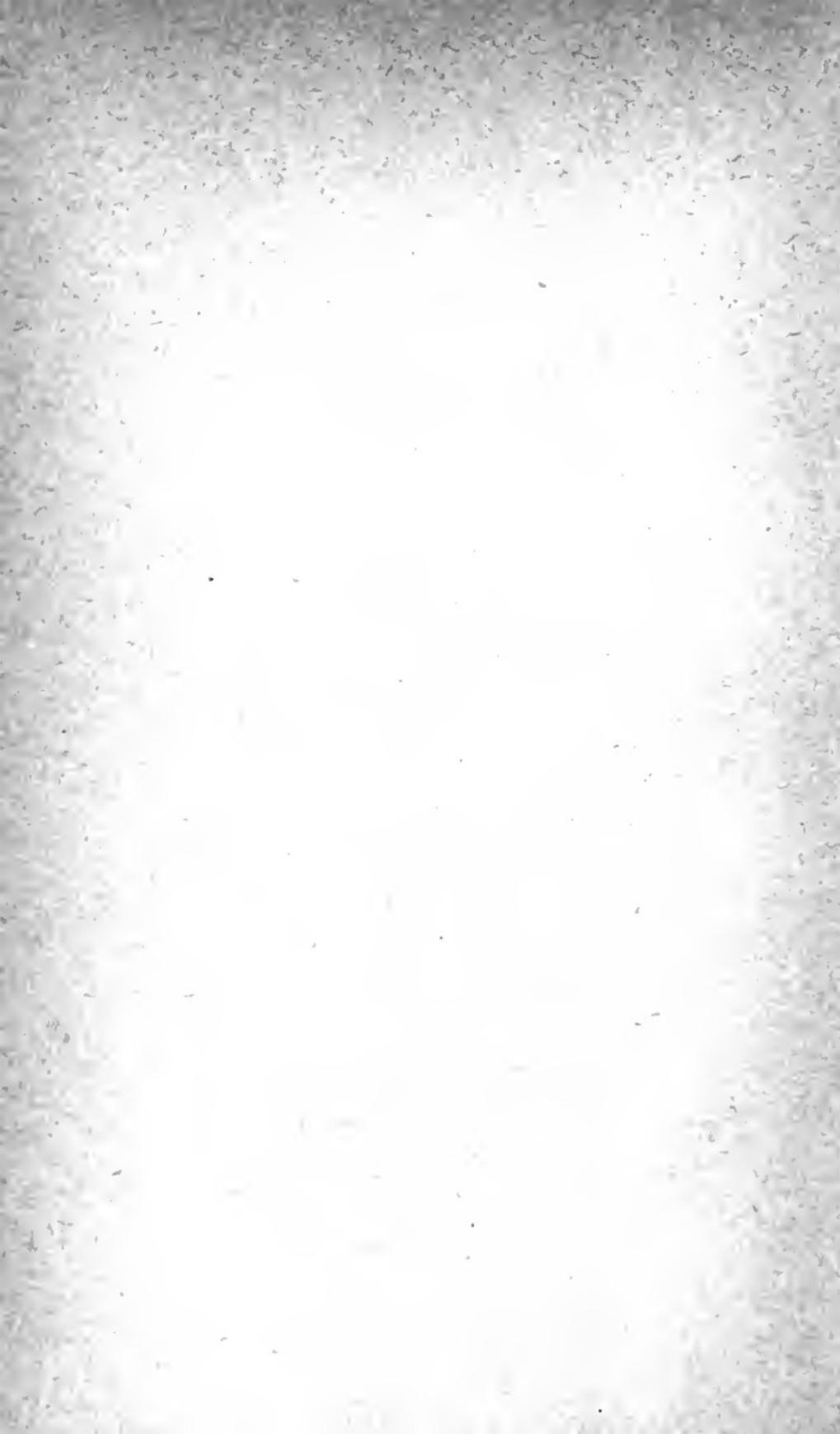
WITH INTRODUCTION BY M. BOURGET

ET respondens centurio, ait: Domine, non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum; sed tantum dic verbo, et sanabitur puer meus. Nam et ego homo sum sub potestate constitutus, habens sub me milites, et dico huic: Vade, et vadit; et alii: Veni, et venit; et servo meo: Fac hoc, et facit.

MATT. viii. 8-9.

LONDON: ANDREW MELROSE LTD.  
3 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.

1917



## P R E F A C E

### I

THIS is a very beautiful book, and one which to all the lovers of letters will intensify the grief they felt fifteen months ago over the premature death of its author, Lieutenant Psichari, who fell heroically in Belgium during the retreat from Charleroi. His first novel, *l'Appel des Armes*, caused, as will be remembered, a very lively sensation, to which two reasons contributed. Ernest Psichari was the grandson of Ernest Renan, and the contrast between his ideas and those of his grandfather could not fail to surprise. But, above all, it was the revelation of an already superior talent and a

singular freshness of thought, wherein the gift of acute expression, the unbroken dream of the visionary artist, was combined with an incomparable subtlety of psychological analysis.

*L'Appel des Armes* tells the story of an officer, Nangès, by the mere suggestion of his personality, curing a young soldier of the worst poisoning of anarchism and pacifism. Few events, a simple story, I had almost said commonplace, but it was so living a portrait, in such bold relief, that that Nangès remains for me, up to the present time, as living as if I had known him in the flesh. Amongst other notable pages in that book there is a conversation between garrison comrades on the profession of the soldier, which is equal in expression, and superior in its range of thought, to the justly celebrated passage of de Vigny's in the second chapter of *Servitude et Grandeur*, which begins : "The Army is a nation within the

nation"; and de Vigny adds: "It is a vice of our days."

For Nangès, on the contrary, the confessed mouthpiece of the novelist, the most valuable work of the soldier is to constitute in the nation a type apart. He, and he alone, represents the principle of obedience, sacrifice, and danger, as necessary to the general tonicity of Society as the secretions of such or such a gland may be to the general energy of the organism. Therefore the soldier must be one of those social species which the most perspicacious of observers, Balzac, had already discerned. "Society," he says in the preface to *La Comédie humaine*, "resembles Nature. Out of man, according to the sphere in which his lot is cast, she makes as many different men as there are varieties in zoology. The differences between a soldier, a workman, an idler, a scholar, a tradesman, a statesman, a sailor, are, though more difficult to perceive, a

considerable as those which distinguish the wolf, the lion, the ass, the horse, from each other."

Hence, there have always existed, there always will exist, social species, as there exist zoological species.

This study of the distinctive character of the soldier was the theme of *l'Appel des Armes*. It is also that of this posthumous story to which the author had given the enigmatical title of *Le Voyage du Centurion*. Of this novel — for it is one, but of so new a type that one hesitates to use the word—the writer left two versions: one, written in the first person and in an autobiographical form; and one—that which we are about to read—in the form of an objective story. The title is explained by the two verses from St. Matthew used as an epigraph: "And the Centurion answered and said: 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only,

and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me : and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth ; and to another, Come, and he cometh ; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it.' " At once you are warned ; this novel essay in military psychology is also an essay in religious psychology.

The novelist claims the right to associate the Gospel with the sword, in virtue of a text which proves that it may, that it must, contain a Christian doctrine of war. The Christ who said to the rich man, "Leave your riches," does not say to the Centurion, "Leave your service." Listening to those words of discipline without rebuke, He makes them His own. What do I say? He admires him who pronounces them. "When Jesus heard it, He marvelled." He added : "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel."

It is, then, the believing soldier that Ernest Psichari will draw for us. He has no mind simply to paint a picture of manners, though that picture too is there, and its features are of a realism that did not shrink from brutality. Being himself a professional soldier, the novelist loves the small details of the service; but he loves still more its spiritual meaning, or, more correctly, he does not separate them; and it is this peculiarity that must be understood in order to enter fully into the spirit of this story.

Already, in *l'Appel des Armes*, he had spoken of the "mysticism of the military profession." This expression is not peculiar to Psichari. In the last contributions of Péguy to the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* he constantly used it, and it is to Péguy that *l'Appel des Armes* is dedicated. This formula reveals a mental state which seems to have been that of all the élite of French youth before 1914.

and the terrible War. The actual test can but have accentuated it.

Mysticism? I look out the word in the dictionary, and find this definition : "Which has a hidden meaning, relating to the mysteries of faith," with an example taken from a letter of Pascal's to Mlle de Roannez : "There are two perfect meanings, the literal and the mystical."

When Péguy reproaches the adepts of such or such a party with lacking the Mysticism of their doctrine, when Psichari makes Nangès say that the Army has its own ethics and its own Mysticism, they mean to declare that our activity, to be complete, must have a hidden meaning and imply a faith. In all human action they discerned two elements: a positive application exterior to man, and a secret signification that is within him.

The soldier makes war: that is the exterior application. Within himself he develops secretly, he brings to their

highest tension certain virtues ; he nourishes, he enriches his soul through his profession. That is the interior work. The life of the soul then becomes the last and deepest reason for endeavour, even the most technical. The act of faith is there, in the affirmation that the spiritual world is not only a reality, but that it is the pre-eminent reality. Without it, the best adapted energy of the most intelligent man does not differ from the work of the spider spinning its web.

George Eliot, in *Silas Marner*, tells of a time when her hero, the weaver of Raveloe, having lost all faith, but indefatigable at his business, begins to lead an "insect-like life." This mechanisation of being, a Péguy, a Psichari recognises as truly in the curiosity of the savant, the calculations of the politician, the wantonness of the voluptuary, as in the slavery of the bureaucrat or the wood-cutter. It is against it that they appeal to the

superior spiritual forces which are at once the highest and deepest of our nature.

Open the pages of *Le Voyage du Centurion*, and, from its first page, observe in what light the novelist introduces to you his hero, Maxence, an officer of sharpshooters, about to lead a column of *méharistes* in Mauritania : " His father—a literary Colonel, a disciple of Voltaire, and worse, a translator of Horace—with all that, an excellent and honest old gentleman, possessed of exquisite manners, had been mistaken. Maxence had a soul. He was born to believe, to love, to hope. He had a soul made in the image of God, capable of discerning Truth from Falsehood, Good from Evil. . . . Yet, for all that, this man, naturally upright, was walking in a crooked path, an equivocal path, although nothing warned him of it, unless it were that hurried beating of the heart, that sense of uneasiness . . . "

You put down the book, and if you

are of those who thirty years ago were twenty years old, you will recollect how your generation thought and felt. It oscillated between an extreme intellectualism and *arrivism*. One was scientist or monist, therefore nihilist, or else brutally ambitious after the style of Rastignac and Julien Sorel.

What a road has been travelled in a quarter of a century, and of what recurrence of ideas does a race remain capable! How do these renewals of vigour baffle the best-founded inductions, the most justifiable prophecies! Let us be very wary of reckoning among the forces of the past the ideas and emotions on which our fathers lived. Is their power exhausted? We shall never know.

## II

It is one of these unexpected recurrences that *Le Voyage du Centurion* relates: the

fresh gushing forth, in the mind and sentiments, of a spring which had appeared dried up. *L'Appel des Armes* had described the military vocation, and in what psychological mould this human type of a very special stamp, which is the soldier, takes its imprint, if one may so express it. *Le Voyage du Centurion* tells us of the awakening of belief in this soldier, and how faith in military orders leads this devotee of discipline to accept all disciplines.

But first, why "the Centurion"? To recall the Gospel episode I have already quoted. Why "the journey"? Because this book is really the story of a journey, the journal, stage by stage, of an expedition in Mauritania.

The Lieutenant Maxence sets off for the desert with a troop whose raising is described in the first lines of the book: "He passed in succession, first, the rearguard, a little compact group of black *méharistes* of the dromedary corps; then the less orderly

company of servants, cooks and scullions ; then the machine-guns oscillating on the sharply outlined backs of the mules ; then the heavy procession of camels laden with baggage ; then the cavalry — tall negroes, crushing beneath their weight the little river-side horses, and Moorish *méharistes* draped in ample *gandoura* , then, lastly, the vanguard, in the centre of which Maxence caught sight of his interpreter, a *Toucouleur* resplendent in his garment of embroidered silk. And beyond all these, glittering and bathed in sunshine, lay that land, destitute of grace and honour, over which wander, sheltered by their tents of camel-skin, the most destitute and miserable of men."

I want to give this quotation as a specimen of the writer's manner, of his colouring, at once so picturesque and true. The singular originality of the story will be understood if I add that this journey is the pilgrimage of a mind, the hunting

athwart its own ideas of a spirit seeking a certainty, of a conscience in quest of a supernatural order, of a heart in torment for God and the Church.

You turn a few pages, and, written with the same pen of the impressionist soldier, you come upon sentences like these:

“Why, then, if Maxence is a soldier of fidelity, why has he acquiesced in such numerous surrenders, why been guilty of so many denials? Why, if he detests Progress, does he reject Rome, the rock of all fidelity? And if he looks upon the unchanging sword with love, why does he turn his eyes away from the unchanging Cross?”

In this novel, then,—this short sketch is sufficient proof,—there are two parallel stories: that of the officer marching over enemy ground, scrutinising space, looking after his men, camping here, fighting otherwhere, questioning, commanding, bending his will to action; and that of

the man who denies, but suffers by the absence of faith as he might suffer in a mutilated limb. He comes to ask of Africa some useful employment for his thirty years ; but also some recovery, some revival, for his inner life, through danger, through solitude, through daily contact with virgin nature and primitive man.

Being a soldier, he acted ; that action was charged with the most acute responsibility, since he represented his country, and this commander of a patrol in the desert took to reflection—the most individual, the most solitary reflection, the most like mental prayer in its inwardness, its reserve, and its custody of the senses.

The masters in spirituality perpetually return to this point. A St. Bonaventura holds the first law of religious meditation to be the rupture with the outside world : “*Sensuum revocatio ab exterioribus*” ; and an unnamed saint : “*Non poteris orare terrenis negotiis et curis implicatus*” (Thou canst

not pray hampered with the affairs and the cares of the earth).

It seems, then, that the Centurion of this journey must appear an impossible paradox, the fantasy of a literary artist haunted by the desire to put contradictions in juxtaposition.

In parentheses, such mosaics are sometimes masterpieces, such as Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Still, one feels such books to be factitious in a way. Here there is nothing artificial; everything is exact and right. You read a few pages of the book, and are at once taken hold of by the tone of experienced reality which cannot be imitated.

We who knew Ernest Psichari know that Maxence is himself; that he really made that expedition in Africa; that he himself went through those crises of the soul. Even if we knew nothing of him personally, we should still say that this story was true; it carries with it that

entire, absolute credibility that is a novel's chief virtue ; without it, the finest miracles of style and composition are wanting. Think of *Salammbô*. In that all the failures in workmanship are forgotten. Think of *Les Trois Mousquetaires*. It is written post-haste, invented in defiance of history. The reader will not disbelieve in it, and therefore it is a great novel, while *Salammbô* is only the most magnificent example of rhetoric in the language.

On what does it depend, this credibility, so that at the present time we say currently : Don Quixote, d'Artagnan, Robinson Crusoe, however different may be the genius of a Cervantes or a Daniel Defoe from the hasty facility of Dumas the improvisatore ? On verisimilitude ? No, since *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, anyhow, abounds in melodramatic adventures bordering on the fantastic. On logic ? No more. I could cite a novel of Mérimée's of which the plot

is closely reasoned in a marvellous fashion ; but this very logic gives the feeling of sham, of manufacture.

To possess credibility, it seems that the author must above all be of good faith, that he must believe in the story he tells with complete spontaneity and simplicity.

That was the case with Dumas and his bullies, with Balzac and his usurers and Duchesses, with Walter Scott and his Jacobites and sorceresses. Such is the case with Psichari and his Centurion and his Africans. Especially is it his case in the anguish and the joys, the remorse and the resolutions he ascribes to him. He does not ask himself if you will have doubts about them ; he does not try to vindicate to you the living anomaly such a duality may appear : the preoccupations of service in the field and meditations after the style of Pascal alternating in the same head. He has no need to combat the objection ; it does not even arise before his eyes. This personage

is his double ; why should he discuss his reality ? And he does not discuss it ; he shows it to you, and you see it with him and like him. It forces itself on you as a fact. This would be the height of art if it were not the very simplicity of nature.

## III

It is not enough to make a book beautiful, with the higher beauty, that it should possess this force of fact ; it is necessary that the fact should be of value. That it always is when through it we reach the depths of a human heart. Never did I more clearly understand the worth of that courageous frankness that says to you, "Thus I am," than in reading this *Voyage du Centurion*. Following a law that at first look is disconcerting, the more intensely we are ourselves, the more others find themselves in us. The scale of mentality is not in fact very extensive,

and as soon as one makes one's way into the depths of psychology, it is not variety one meets with, but unity, identity.

Let us follow the analyst of the *Voyage du Centurion* into the work of moral delving to which he gave himself up. He knew himself for a soldier; and now, when he finds himself in the sphere of his activity, he knows himself for a French soldier. When he left for the desert, he had certainly said: "It is France that has given me —me, a humble lieutenant—this immense country, given it to me as a park where I may play and leap, and come and go, just as the fancy seizes me, and according to the prompting of my own good pleasure." And at once he added: "But Maxence felt no gratitude towards his country." Strange cry, and which would be blasphemous if this *Voyage du Centurion* were not really also a discovery of France.

Like many young men of his generation, Maxence, at his entrance into life, had

seen but a very narrow corner of his country and but very passing fashions. He had taken Paris for France ; and not only so, but in Paris a few coteries where the apparent refinement of minds ill concealed their fundamental poverty. Everywhere he had felt false pretences, imposture, emptiness. And now, in Mauritania, on the borders of that colonial empire conquered by his fellows, he finds evidence of his race's worth ; he feels that he is part of a great people ; he feels, too, that he is in face of a different people. Yes, different, but in what ? In its religion. For the first time he realises that even to-day France in presence of Africa is the Church in presence of Islam, the Cross standing opposite the Crescent.

“ What matter if Maxence be unhappy, what matter if he be bad ? He is the envoy of Western power. He cannot help himself : twenty centuries of Christianity separate him from the Moors.

"The power whose badge he wears has reconquered the sands from Islam, and on her shoulders she carries the heavy Cross. She is the power of Christianity."

Can you see how, while carrying his analysis of the soldier's profession to the very end, the thinker in him discovers the Christian, and also by what intimate necessity the two stories, that of battle and that of prayer, meet and unite?

Remember now the stories told us by those who, in this month of November 1915, have come back from the firing-line, and the solemnity, the devotion of those Masses said in the trenches. The Centurion has but discerned in himself sooner the Crusader typified in all who wear the uniform of France.

Some, like him, appear conscious of it; others will remain ignorant to the last of the mystical character of their own action. The Crusader lives in us all; that explains why war, understood after the fashion of the

Germans, begets a horror which revolts the most secret fibres of our souls ; for we are the soldiers of Christianity, and we are facing the soldiers of Odin.

Having arrived at this stage of reflection, the author of *Le Voyage du Centurion* might have stopped. The national point of view is a sort of pragmatism.

One knows that this word—which comes from the Greek *pragmatikós*, concerning affairs and facts—is used to-day to describe an apologetic founded solely on utility.

It is certain, in fact, that truth cannot be measured by utility ; it is no less certain that utility remains a presumption of truth, so that pragmatism, erroneous as a definite philosophy, is quite legitimate so far as method and the beginnings of investigation go ; it is but the working-out of the saying about the false prophets : “An evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit. By their fruits you shall know them.”

It is a first stage whereat a sincerely religious spirit cannot stay. Action is not enough for it; or rather, action for it is but a symbol of a spiritual reality that spirit needs to reach.

Ernest Psichari puts this clearly. His Maxence assures himself confidently that "face to face with the Arab, he is a Frank, holding fast to the certitude that his race has been for ever consecrated. . . . And what should be his pride, when confronted by the Moor, if not a Catholic pride?"

But his historian, his brother, at once adds: "His heart is fretted by a dull anxiety. Let those who are weak sustain themselves by noble dreams! But as for him, it is Truth that he demands with violence. A lofty intellectual enthusiasm urges him on, and this fever of mind will not suffer him to rest till he possess the veritable Truth, the calm serenity of well-grounded reason. He demands in the first place that Jesus Christ should be in

very fact the Word of God, that the Church should be with absolute certainty the infallible guardian of the Truth. . . .”

Here I can but refer the reader to the text itself. The pages in which Ernest Psichari relates the dialogue between his Maxence—himself—and God, in the desert, recall in their eloquence and pathos the famous *Mystère de Jésus*. To my mind they are amongst the most beautiful on which our mystical literature may pride itself. Do not seek in them more abstract reasoning, dialectics, or exegesis than in the fourth book of *The Imitation*. The truth Maxence seeks is not the truth of the schools ; it is learnt neither in the libraries nor in the laboratories. It is a living truth, that must be felt at the same time that it is understood. It is a relation of the soul with the Eternal Mind, the Eternal Love, the Eternal Power.

Reading this magnificent finale, I remembered that in a letter Ernest Psichari

wrote to me from the garrison at Cherbourg in the winter of 1914, while he was finishing the *Centurion*, he had said: "It makes me tremble to write in the presence of the Most Holy Trinity." Strange words from a young novelist to his elder. Revealing words, which enable us to understand what this grandson of Renan asked of the literary art — an apostolate of sublime feeling, a bread of life to distribute to hearts, with which to stir up the virtue of the Sacrifice of blood on the eve of a crisis he foresaw would be tragic.

This posthumous book is, so to speak, the testament of that great soul.

I think I shall have rendered its writer the testimony he would best have liked when I end simply by saying that *Le Voyage du Centurion* is in accordance with the death of him who wrote it. They are two similar acts of faith, interchangeable.

The Christian hero would have for-

bidden us to weep "like those who have no hope"; but how can we obey him and keep our tears from falling, those impotent tears, in view of that noble promise unfulfilled?

PAUL BOURGET.

*November 1915.*

## ERNEST PSICHARI

BORN in Paris on the 27th of September 1883, son of Jean Psichari and grandson on his mother's side of Ernest Renan, Ernest Psichari studied hard at the Lycée Henri IV., and in 1902 took a brilliant degree in philosophy. During his year of military service he formed an enthusiastic liking for the military career which was never to be destroyed. After a term in the Infantry, he went to the Congo under the command of Colonel Lenfant, and in 1908 returned with the Military Medal from that exploration. His literary gifts were already showing themselves, and in the same year he published a volume entitled *Terres de Soleil et de Sommeil*

(Lands of Sun and Sleep), which was crowned by the French Academy.

Ernest Psichari got his commission at the School of Artillery at Versailles, and in 1909 left for Mauritania, where he spent three fruitful years, filled with exploits of war (he was mentioned in the Order of the Day in the fight at Tichitt) and with philosophic meditations.

It is known that Psichari, with admirable sincerity, felt his ideas altering in the desert, and on his return was converted to Catholicism. He brought back with him in December 1912 a book—*l'Appel des Armes*—which gave eloquent expression to the traditional ideas of the young generation.

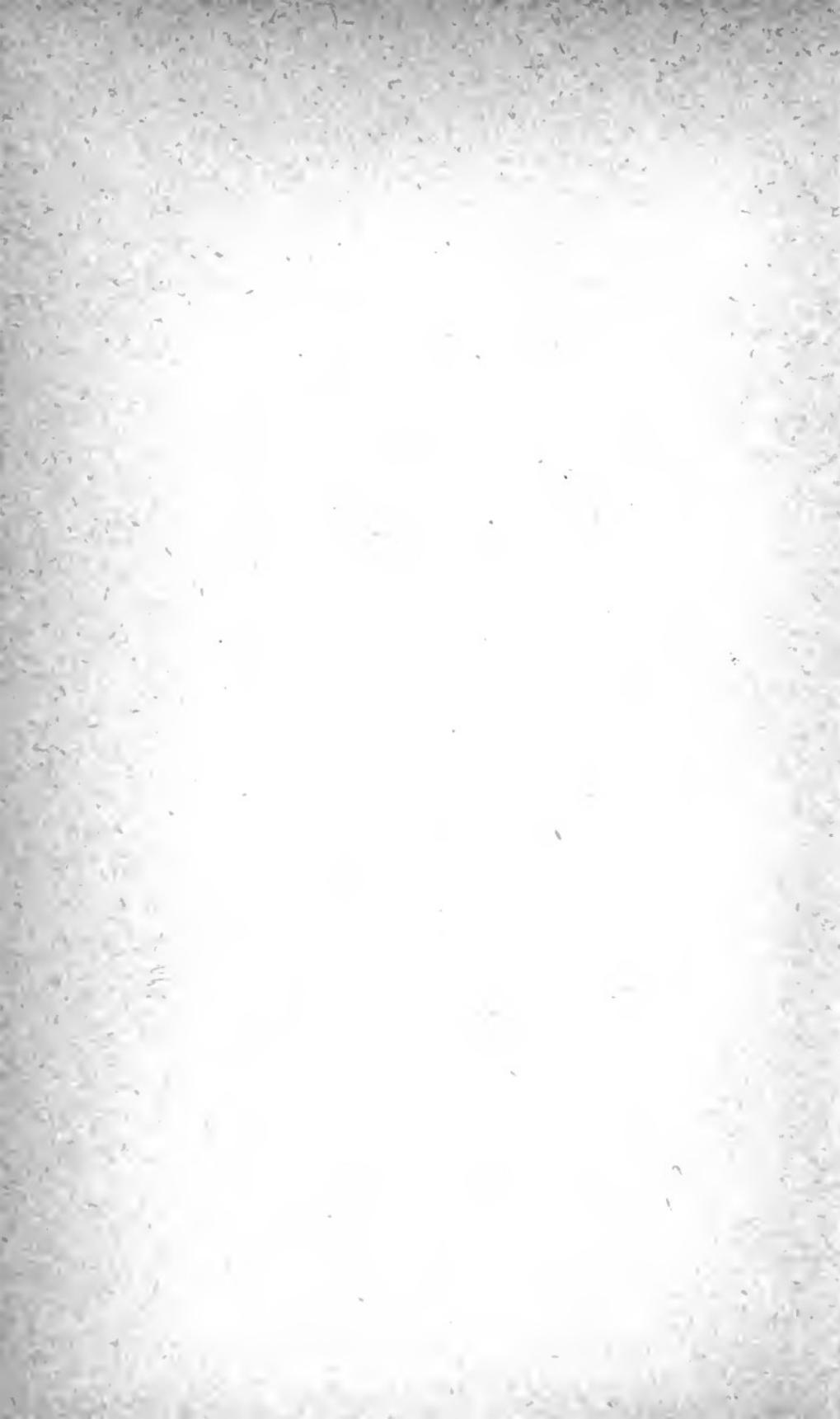
But Ernest Psichari, in that lengthy and poetical solitude, had written also *Le Voyage du Centurion*, in which his religious sentiments and his mystical originality have found magnificent expression. He finished it at Cherbourg in the

Spring of 1914. The French Academy honoured the short and brilliant literary life of the young writer with an important prize.

The War found Ernest Psichari in the 2nd Regiment of Colonial Artillery at Cherbourg. On the 7th of August he set forth with the most enthusiastic eagerness. On the 22nd of August 1914 he fell at the battle of Rossignol in Belgium, defending his guns to the last minute, and faithful unto death to his religious and patriotic convictions.

He was thirty years old.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE.



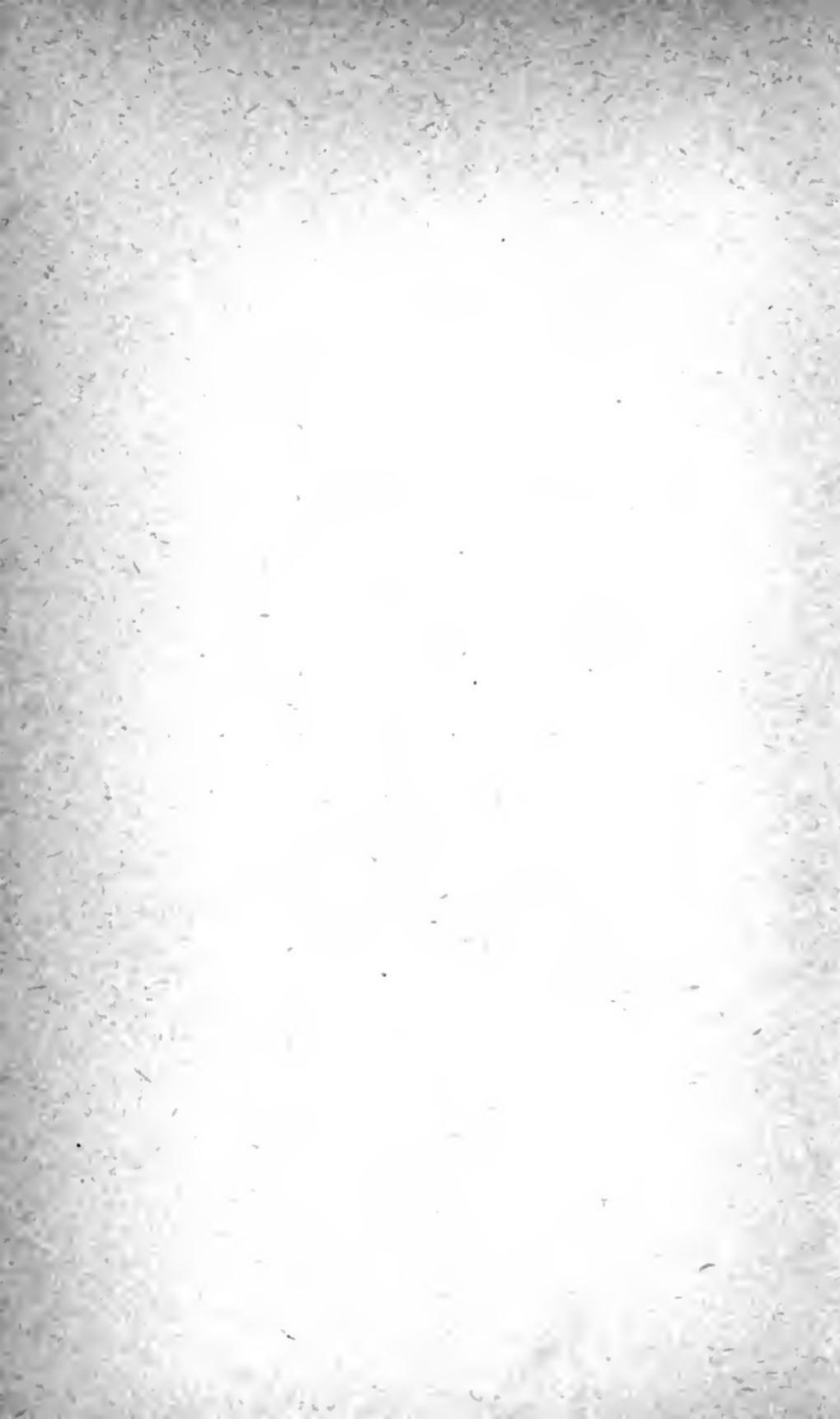
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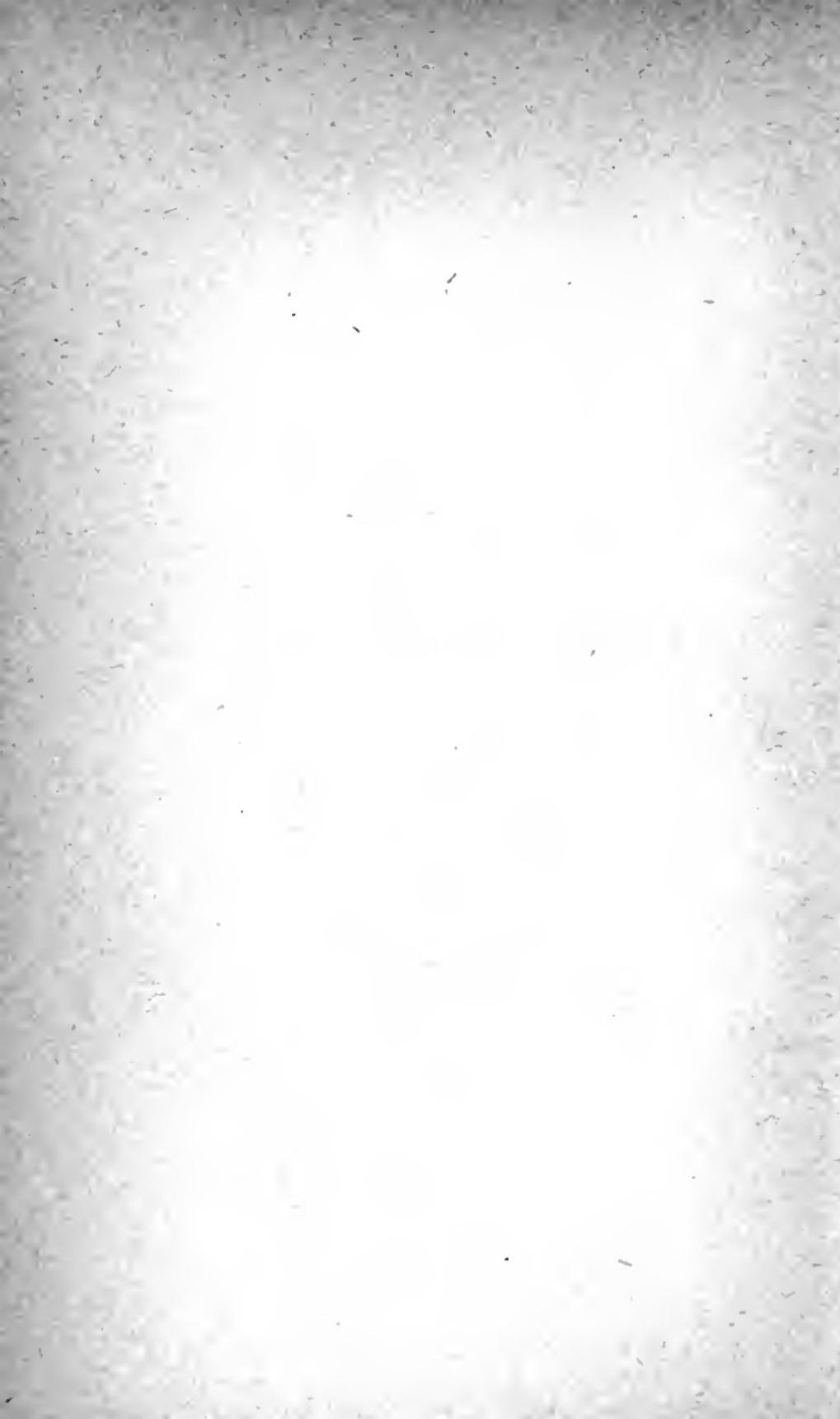
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## FIRST PART



# I

## Inter Mundanas Varietates

Maxence is free—He curses his country—Picture of Maxence: he has a soul and a heart—The France he has left behind him—Good intentions—First stages in the desert—The gravity of Africa—Submission—Solitude.

MAXENCE could not take his stand upon a hillock, for there was not one in sight, but, wishing to assure himself as to the ordering of the troops just placed under his command, he set spurs to his horse, and galloped the whole length of the column that was winding forward among the feathery mimosas of Africa. He passed in succession, first, the rearguard, a little compact group of black *meharistes* of the dromedary corps; then the less

orderly company of servants, cooks and scullions; then the machine-guns oscillating on the sharply outlined backs of the mules; then the heavy procession of camels laden with baggage; then the cavalry—tall negroes, crushing beneath their weight the little river-side horses, and Moorish *méharistes* draped in ample gandourahs; then, lastly, the vanguard, in the centre of which Maxence caught sight of his interpreter, a *Toucouleur* resplendent in his garment of embroidered silk. And beyond all these, glittering and bathed in sunshine, lay that land, destitute of grace and honour, over which wander, sheltered by their tents of camel-skin, the most destitute and miserable of men.

Maxence, his inspection over, drew a deep breath. He felt himself free; lighter of limb, bolder of heart, younger even, though he was but thirty years old. All this belonged to him, men, animals,

baggage, the very earth that he crushed so carelessly beneath his feet, like the spoilt child of a royal house impatient to grasp everything and dare all. To him, humble Lieutenant of the Armies of the Republic, France had given this immense country, had given it to him as a park where he might play and leap, and come and go, just as the fancy seized him, and according to the prompting of his own good pleasure.

But he—he felt no gratitude towards his country. On the contrary, he had a sensation of relief that he was rid of her. In truth, he hated her, for up till now he had known nothing of her but her vice and misery. What, indeed, did he not hate? Nothing had disposed this heart to love—far otherwise, its deeply rooted pain, its bitterness, its restlessness, inclined it to hate. And thus no gracious, noble memories linked Maxence to his country, although for her, in the marshes

of Lake Tchad, he had already shed his purest drops of youthful blood.

Maxence was the son of a literary Colonel, a disciple of Voltaire, and worse, a translator of Horace—with all that, an excellent and honest old gentleman, possessed of exquisite manners. Looking back, the son realised that his true starting-point had been those youthful hours spent in the company of Homer and of Virgil, with the Colonel for guide. No stroke of the bow more admirable could be devised for the opening bars of a life desirous of giving forth some harmony. All through his childhood Maxence had been familiar with the Latin mode of thought, and when he made out his interior balance-sheet, that was the only memory he could write down as an asset. But afterwards, when he had passed from childhood into youth, how great had been his loneliness and destitution! His father had provided food for

the intellect, but not for the soul. The troubling approach of manhood found him defenceless, with no protection against evil, no shield against the sophisms and the deceitfulness of the world.

At twenty years old, Maxence was wandering half-heartedly in the poisoned gardens of vice, wandering like a sick man, haunted by obscure remorse, disturbed at the malignity of falsehood, weighed down by the horrible mockery of an existence in which both thought and feeling are allowed to run riot. His father had made a mistake: Maxence had a soul. He was born to believe, to love, to hope. He had a soul made in the image of God, capable of discerning Truth from Falsehood, Good from Evil. He could not resign himself to the belief that Truth and Purity were but vain words, resting on no solid basis. He had a soul, marvellous to say, and a soul that had not been created for

doubt, nor for blasphemy, nor for anger. Yet, for all that, this man, naturally upright, was walking in a crooked path, an equivocal path, although nothing warned him of it, unless it were that hurried beating of the heart, that sense of uneasiness, which comes to those who, pausing in their work of destruction, turn and contemplate the pile of ruins their sacrilegious hands have left behind them.

Maxence had been brought up far from the Church. He was, therefore, a sick man, who could not by any possibility know the remedy for his disease. Disgusted with everything, he did not even know the cause of his disgust, still less the means by which he might give to his low vitality a little tone. For eight years, from the time that he had left Saint-Cyr at twenty-two until he was thirty, he had wandered about the world, uttering imprecations under every sky. Thus, with indignant reproaches on his

lips, wholly ignorant of the gracious gentleness of Christianity, yet despising the lies and ugliness of the France he knew, he fled from continent to continent, from ocean to ocean, without a star to guide him through the changing scenes of earth.

And now destiny is leading the young officer towards the desert. Enchanting word!—word that had brought forgetfulness and dreams in hours of nervous melancholy when a mere sound hurt him, so urgent was his need of solitude and silence. Scarcely has he rounded the corner, and left the banks of the Senegal River behind him, when Maxence trembles with impatience at thought of the lovely thing lying over yonder behind the mimosas of the Brackna country, and of which he forms for himself a thousand images, both strange and beautiful. The pure warm air fills his lungs; he draws it in with every breath, as wave after

wave of it blows from the east. For him this journey is a truce. He will no longer hear the language of his country, he will know nothing about her, he will forget all the wretchedness, all the folly that he has witnessed. Wide spaces are opening out before him ; he plunges into them, and the door closes behind him, blown to by a strong gust of the night wind.

But on this point Maxence is deceiving himself. The desert is full of France, and one meets her at every step. Only she is not the France one sees in France, the France of sophists and false scholars, of reasoners bereft of reason. She is the France who is virtuous, pure, and simple, who has reason for her helmet, and fidelity for her shield. No one can fully understand her unless he is a Christian. Yet virtue goes out of her, if only the sick man in his fever has not lost his liking for health.

One of the first places where Maxence halted was the station of Aleg, a little crenellated fort crowning a small rocky height. Although close to the river, it yet belongs to the desert by reason of the arid plains it dominates, and also on account of that air of proud poverty which is the distinguishing mark of the Sahara. From afar, the young officer saw the French flag floating over the topmost roof. At the outer wall, as he was on the point of entering, the tirailleur on guard sprang to attention and presented arms. In bygone years, during his first expeditions, such a sight used to make Maxence start with happiness. He remembered the feeling of joyful surprise when, on the borders of China, after a long day's march, he used to catch sight of the beloved symbol of French fraternity hanging in the warm shadow of the other blazing banners. But, confronted by the flag of Aleg, he felt ill at ease. The

France it symbolised was so very unlike the France he had just left. And then, in his gloomy haste to bury himself in the vast tomb of the Sahara, he was annoyed at the prospect of having once again the trouble of conversing with comrades in arms.

In the evening, when he found himself once more on the road to the north, he felt more comfortable. Decidedly, France—the France where he had been so unhappy—was receding into the distance; one by one, the ropes that held him to her were being loosened. The little column passed the well of Tankassas, and, as the moon was full, Maxence did not halt his men until the middle of the night, somewhere in the silent solitude.

While the tirailleurs stretched themselves upon the sand, wrapped in their blankets, their young commander, erect in the middle of the little square formed by this camp of a single night, was

hailing the hour of his deliverance. His heart was filled with dreams. Fresh breezes were wandering among the prickly mimosas. Everything lay asleep in the exquisite purity of the clear moonlight, and, sharply defined and motionless, the silhouettes of the sentries with fixed bayonets stood out against the white sky.

At length Maxence recognised it again, that peculiar odour of Africa which in the past he had so loved. Once more he felt that life-giving breeze which calls forth all that is best in us. And he saw himself again just as he had been in the days of his youth, when, finding himself in other solitudes, he had called on them to help him, and with their strength to remedy his weakness. O you who are oppressed by some obscure suffering, all you who are dismasted and disabled, follow the example of Maxence, and, leaving behind you the lies of cities, make your way towards those uncultivated

lands that seem as though they had but come a moment since warm from the hands of the Creator! Climb up towards your source and, resting upon the solid basis of elemental things, try to discover once again the lineaments of changeless, tranquil Truth.

Many a similar night had Maxence passed. Many another was in store for him. That which he required this evening, this first evening, was that Africa, on whose soil he was once more standing, should give him useful counsel. "May each stage of my journey," he said to himself, "be of use to my heart." His firmest decision, his strongest resolution, was to go forward intent upon himself, determined (at all costs) to conquer himself by violence, to demand ceaselessly from this ancient land the virtues he desired above all others—strength of character, uprightness, purity of heart, nobility, candour. Because he knew

great things are done by Africa, he could exact everything from her, and through her from himself. Because her very form typifies Eternity, he could demand of her Truth, Beauty, Goodness, all that is veritable and eternal.

The long wanderings to which Maxence was going to give three years of his life, and those the best, were commencing auspiciously. Already he had learnt by experience to practise the frugality of a nomad life. Rising before dawn, he would cover several leagues during the morning hours at the head of his men. Towards ten o'clock, his tent was set up, and he ate his meal, which consisted of rice and the flesh of roes that had been killed that morning. Then he received the Moors, informed himself as to the affairs of the district, and attended to the thousand and one details that necessarily result in a desert country from the command of a column of some importance.

He did not know what good this austere life was going to do him. But he was so constituted that he preferred it to the horns of plenty so freely offered to him in his own country. He felt that a spiritual life is perfectly possible in the Sahara, and perhaps also, in his vague longing for pardon, he believed that he might by this very physical destitution ransom himself from far more grievous suffering.

Eleven days' march distant rises the vertical sandstone cliff of the Tagant, beset on all sides by wave upon wave of frothy desert sand. Beyond, the traveller comes upon grassy valleys or *oueds* that relieve the monotony of the endless pebbles and rocks, and meets too with occasional tablelands where wandering sheep nibble at little patches of corn. Now and again, among the rocks, he catches sight of a baobab tree, or passes a field of water-melons, and then he hears

a faint bucolic note amid the desolation of Walpurgis Mountain. Here it was that Maxence proposed to drill and instruct his troop, so that it might be brave and swift, independent of material comforts, rich only in those virtues that he required in his soldiers: courage, cheerfulness, the spirit of enterprise, honour. He avoided the station of Moudjéria that lay sleeping, wrapped in its sands, at the foot of the cliff, and, already shunning the society of his equals, he bent his course towards the eastern horizon, so as to follow the two parallel lines of the mountain up to the spring of Garaouel. He contented himself with sending the infantry and cavalry to Moudjéria, along with most of the baggage. He wanted none with him in the desert but the docile dromedary corps, who had only one thought, and that his own.

Arrived at Garaouel, he said: "Here I am at the foot of the wall! Before

me are the rocks that must be scaled before I enter the new world of the Tagant."

In the fold of the mountain, deep in the hollow of a narrow gorge, lay three basins, and the trees drooped heavily over the dark mirror of the water. Low grottoes had been built in the sides of the walls. The birds were singing, and their song suggested deep refreshing slumber to one who had marched all day through the glowing furnace of the plain.

Maxence threw himself down in one of the grottoes. From where he lay he saw nothing but a kind of huge bowl filled with water, and a tall fig-tree springing out of the rock. He thought of the Tagant, for always his mind was at least one stage in front of his body, and he was wont to see the sights of to-morrow more clearly than those of to-day. "Behind all this," said he, "lies a new

life." Then, sitting up joyfully: "*Vita nuova! Vita nuova!*" he exclaimed. A life almost, as it were, aerial, a life that should advance by leaps and bounds, with the swift glad motion of a grasshopper springing over the crust of the globe: sabre thrusts; action quick and furious, shattering the rigidity of the bodily frame; a supple mind in a supple body; evenings of battle, filled with hatred and the pursuit of the Moslems to their very lairs.

And then, in the breezy hollows of the high tableland, long intervals when, his finger on his forehead, he could meditate on cause and on effect. He forgot that soul of his—the soul that in France had been crushed, lost, destroyed. He forgot how he had stood upon the pavement of Paris, his teeth chattering, enveloped in the whirling rain.

He lay back upon the mat that had been spread upon the gritty stone, and

fell asleep. It was night when a soft voice roused him from his slumbers:

"Would you like dinner, Lieutenant?"

"Yes. . . ."

Lights were sparkling here and there in the shadows—they were the field kitchens of the tirailleurs, beside each of which a big black African crouched singing. Maxence made an effort to remember how the landscape was wont to look by night. Leaning there upon his elbow, he felt happy. The hour was sweet, suggesting as it did complete renunciation and perfect resignation. Just so is Africa herself, and such an hour is typical of her.

The land of Africa is redolent of submission, not revolt. On her soil men must obey, not chafe beneath the yoke. Distant indeed are the curses of the jaded workman as he tosses his pickaxe into a corner of the garret! Distant, for ever distant, the blasphemies and

imprecations of those who, their heads high, assert their independence by an impudent toss! Ah yes! this hour was spangled with obedience, with trust. But obedience to what? Trust in what? Maxence did not know; he was conscious only of the gracious charm of these moments of the night, spent in the hollow of the rock near his men, while the humble rice bubbled in the pots above the smoking twigs.

And thus his heart, so full of affection, overflowed. In the past, his masters had never required of him the gift of this heart. Yet here he was quite ready to give himself up to the austere Rule of Africa, austere and gentle, gentle viewed from within, austere viewed from without, as is every Rule. Two days before reaching the restful shade of Garaouel, just at the hour when parched throats are painfully swallowing their saliva, the column had come upon a pool between

the rocks, of the sort that the Moors call "gueltas." The water was dark and full of impurities, for some trains of camels had drunk there the day before. "All the waters of Africa taste sweet to me," Maxence had said, "for this is the land, far from all lies and compromises, that I have chosen for my true country. And this special water, just as it is, I love." Such things did the persuasive desert already whisper in his ear.

The young man waited for the peaceful twilight of the following evening before quitting his grotto. Then, still dazzled by the daylight that was so long in dying, he gave the order to start. The ascent of the mountain, almost perpendicular at Garaouel, was very stiff, and took them a long time. Maxence, when at last he reached the topmost rock, gazed down upon the plain that lay open at his feet like the page of a book, a page that has been read and is just about

to be turned. Over all this the air was still, but down below, stormy winds were blowing above the canopy of clouds that roofed in the low-lying plain, and he, already on the heights, could conceive the eddies flowing, like sea-currents, through the upper regions of the atmosphere.

In the Tagant, they passed over rocky ground where, despite the dusk that had already fallen, the camels did not stumble ; on the contrary, they steered cautiously from their great height, arranging for their feet to fall on smooth places, delicately padding over obstacles, and never for a moment ceasing their habitual rhythmic see-saw. Maxence, intoxicated with space, continued his march. But soon, as certain portions of the column were lagging behind, he gave the order that great bonfires should be kindled to serve as an indication of the route.

Soon, from behind each fold of the mountain, huge flames leapt forth, glow-

ing like Bengal lights above the bushes. Section after section of the scene came into view, each with its own illumination. Behind the promontories of the rocks, in the cold serenity of the night, the whole stage of earth was lit up as far as the lower slopes of the mountain. The men wound their way silently through the lofty wings by a path of flame, each bend in the route revealing a fresh fire. The sight elated Maxence. He saw himself on this moonless evening, in the very heart of the earth, and alone of his race, commanding a troop of soldiers to the north of Garaouel, where not a soul suspected him to be.

Next day, they entered a sort of wide, irregularly formed hollow where, on all sides, pallid tufts of grass and stretches of sand met the eye. It led towards the north, and therefore was a favourable route for the column hastening towards Oued-el-Abiod and its ruins, around which various tribes were settled. For some

days Maxence pushed on through the tame scenery of the valley—a monotonous march, and yet ennobled, from time to time, by memories of conquest: here, a mound of earth where French blood had flowed; there, a few stakes commemorating the stand made by a handful of brave men; there, again, some ruined walls, last vestige of a transitory station. But everywhere there was the same austerity, the same nobility and dignity.

The mornings, especially—those mornings that bring with them no surprise, reveal no secret, but tranquilly unfold their sheets of light—the mornings seemed to be impregnated with virtue and simplicity. The grave seriousness of the landscape at dawn was almost painful to Maxence. All tendency to raillery died down before these dawns, when necessarily a commander must feel anxious because the day that follows will be long, beset by ambushes and thronged with cares.

There will be no place in it for smiles, for relaxation, for the happiness that comes to a father when, after a day of toil, he stretches out his arms towards his first-born child.

Ah no! they do not laugh, the people of Africa. They will never be sceptics. They will make their choice. They will not throw in their lot with those who wish to reconcile all things, what is true with what is false, and who welcome everything with outstretched hands and a false smile upon their lips. Let the fastidious depart, those whom the burden of the day appals and who are wounded by a few coarse sentiments. Let those depart who cannot bear the heat of the sun; let those men alone remain who are simple of heart and who do not refuse simplicity, and let them take root in the virtue of the soil. But let those for ever depart who hesitate, who take a step forward and then draw back, like a man from the town walking along

a treacherous sandy shore ; and let those depart also who would tremble before too uncompromising a truth, again like the man from the town, blinking his eyes at the dazzling facets of the ocean. The rough, strong food of Africa is not for them. In Africa, a man must look life firmly in the face, and his glance must be single, concentrated on that which is before him, and wholly frank and clear.

After long days of march, Maxence arrived at Ksar-el-Barca, where he intended to encamp for some time, as he had camels to buy, men to recruit from the neighbouring tribes, and a raw company to drill into shape. This ruined town is situated near some drooping palm-trees in the sandy hollow of Oued-el-Abiod, but it rests towards the north upon the rocks of the high Tagant. Seen from the trees of Oued, the straight roofless walls of cold stone have still a great air of antiquity.

Like the Westerner he was, Maxence immediately made his way towards these rude witnesses to the past. But the tremendous heat of the sun reflected from the walls turned him giddy, and he retired again to the shade of the palm-trees. Here he found himself in a veritable hot-house, full of light and sound, very remote from life as he knew it, but close to the heart of things. Men passed him on their way to the camp—an old man with a white beard, some young ones with gleaming eyes. It was necessary to stop and speak to them for a few moments. Then he rejoined his soldiers, and without delay gave the order for a strong stockade of thorny branches to be constructed all round the camp. At last he withdrew to his tent, a little giddy, but glad indeed to have cast anchor after marching for so many days under the hot sunshine and the scorching winds of the plains.

Henceforth, a life of true solitude and

silence begins for Maxence. Here, on this plot of some thirty square yards, with no longer even the hubbub of departures and arrivals to disturb him, he learns what solitude really is, as it exists deep in the bosom of silent Nature. For the Rule of Africa is silence. As the monk in the cloister keeps silence, so does the white-cowled desert. And the young Frenchman too conforms unhesitatingly to the strict observance of the Rule. Piously he listens as, one by one, the hours drop down into the all-encompassing Eternity. He dies to the world that has deceived him.

During the overwhelming heat of the day, while irregular native troops and dromedary-men were asleep in their familiar sunshine, Maxence was wont to remain under his frail shelter of canvas, and there, his knees drawn up to his chin, to wait, simply wait, not for the approach of evening, but for something mysterious

and grand, he knew not what. Thus, in this dead region, where no human being has ever yet possessed a fixed dwelling, he felt as though he had transcended the ordinary boundaries of life, and were walking, trembling and giddy, along the edge of highest heaven.

Of an evening, he would climb the steep rocks that dominated the camp towards the north. As far as the eye could reach, he saw nothing but stunted bushes with scanty foliage, springing up here and there on the desolate plains. In the distance, sandy hills encircled the horizon. But, rather than that his gaze should lose itself in their far wastes, he would turn once more towards the palm-trees, whose luminous shade sheltered the tents of the soldiers. These tents alone, amid the absolute stagnation, were a touch of life—a feeble beating as of wings in the still air.

After the heat of the day, the fresh

twilight inspired Maxence with a sense of buoyancy and exultation, as of a spirit bounding free through space. In truth, vaster far than in the daytime, the abyss of space did then open out above the little circle of the earth. And he, the man weighed down by thought, standing at the centre of the circle, would lose himself in poignant dreams, quite forgetful of his personal troubles, borne along by the irresistible movement of the great orb spinning forward into the shadow.

Such is the figure of Maxence in the desert. A whole past of strife is lifted from him, but he sees nothing in front of him but a shapeless form. Africa turns towards him a frozen visage, the mask of death. All that belongs to the senses is reabsorbed into silence. The pleasant warmth of men ceases to sustain him, and he feels himself forsaken by all. And yet it is from out this very nothingness that he must draw something which *is*, and

from this absolute destitution that he must draw superabundance. If not, why then he must go back to his own country shame-faced and empty-handed, even more unhappy than before, having made a total and irremediable failure of his life.

But Maxence troubled himself little about such dilemmas. Alone upon his rock, the mere fact of having found the stars again was enough for him. Was he not their comrade, a wanderer like them, solitary like them? And, in his far, desolate corner of the world, he raised his eyes towards the noble Orion, emerging in solitary grandeur from behind the mysterious veils of the horizon.

## II

### The Captivity among the Saracens

The friend of Maxence asks the question—Maxence does not ask it—But the hero's life of intense activity is a kind of purgative life—His sight is not strong enough to look within him at things interior—And so, captive in a strange land, he looks about him at things exterior—The spiritual flowers of the Sahara—The morality of the holiest of the Moors does not suffice the most sinful of the Franks—First vision of sorrowful and Christian France.

MAXENCE was exactly in the frame of mind necessary for the Sahara. He was strong enough to be hammered into shape on that terrible anvil, like a sword in the grip of the tongs, held near the column of flame that springs up straight and fierce, fanned by the scorching blast. He demanded nothing better than the free, untrammelled existence of

this open furnace. France was dead in him.

Every month, however, the swift arrival of the mail brought to the exile some tatters torn from his distant country. He tossed them away with a feeling of annoyance, and then, with a certain savage joy, plunged once again into his solitude—fearing, it may be, a moment of weakness, or, on the contrary, deeming himself already far too strong to need the help of friendship, tenderness.

One day a card came to him which he read with mingled surprise, pleasure, and uneasiness. It was a picture of the weeping Virgin of la Salette, and on the back these simple lines were written :

“ MAXENCE,—We have prayed for you on the top of the holy mountain. It seems to me that she is weeping over you, this beautiful Virgin, that she wants you. Will you not listen to her?—Your brother and friend,

PIERRE-MARIE.”

For the first time Maxence felt that a breath of tenderness had come to him from far-off Gaul. He in no wise believed in prayer, and yet it seemed to him that the friend who prayed for him loved him better than the others—was, indeed, the only one who loved him. Yes, this Pierre-Marie was indeed his brother. The white face that rose before him, with its transparent cheeks, its thin and ill-grown beard, its trusty, tranquil eyes—that white face slightly bent towards the narrow shoulder was truly the face of his friend.

Maxence reflected that all his life Pierre-Marie had been his good genius. When he had been tossed towards him by the surf, his heart confused by the roar of Ocean, it seemed to him as though he were entering the serene domain of the intellect. This scholar had weighed everything, had held everything in the hollow of his narrow palm, and then, having set all things in order according to right

reason and perfect balance, he had stepped as a master, without any fear of stumbling, into the highest regions of the mind. His was truly the triumph of a disciplined mind over rebellious matter.

The young soldier thought of that noble life, given over to meditation and passed in purity. How miserable he felt himself to be in comparison! Yet, after all, nothing binds this man, so full of eager longing, to the sins of men—sins which he has known only too well. On the contrary, he has had to make a ridiculous effort in order to sin, so little does he really care about it. He resembles many others who, confronted by Evil, puff themselves out like the frog, making themselves as important as they can, and imagining that they are really as big as it. Like those who do not know what fresh thing to be after, and so pull off an insect's legs, one by one, just to amuse themselves, so Maxence amuses himself with what is

forbidden, in order to see what will happen. And he takes pleasure in exaggerating his unhappy state, although he is by no means tightly bound, but can escape if he will, and fling aside the cloak in which he has been strutting with such pride.

Yet that is not all—indeed, it is nothing. The attainment of Truth remains, Truth in its entirety. It remains for him to grasp the one thing that is real, instead of dissipating himself among mere appearances. But how should the noble advance of a Pierre-Marie towards certitude with regard to things invisible, be possible for this Maxence, whose whole bent is that of action, and whose encounter with life resembles that of two rams facing each other, horn to horn, upon a bridge? He, Maxence, demands of life, raids in the brilliant sunshine, definite booty captured by his strong right arm ; he has to grapple with the difficulty of provisioning troops ;

he is immersed in military details. When he sits down to think, for example, in the breathless hush of noon, after the chase of a roe, he feels a great silence fall around him, and within him he is conscious of a need, a wave of dumb anxiety; but the weight of his body and his cumbersome limbs influence his spirit, and off he starts once more, dragging his feet, and adjusting the strap of his gun upon his shoulder.

And thus, the question that Pierre-Marie asks, Maxence does not ask of himself. And if, by any chance, he were to ask it, what help would he obtain in this desert? Here are no books to stimulate the mind, no churches to assist the heart. Not so much as a fragment of old stained glass; not the slightest whiff of incense. With outstretched hands, Maxence gropes forward in the shadow, but he meets with nothing; he is veritably alone—alone in a night so dark that no rift of silver comes to sustain his weakness.

Vain, to all appearance, has been the apparition of the Virgin in tears at the very point where his path plunged into the desert. Vain, the strange greeting of her who is crowned and engirdled with roses. Vain, this greeting given by the rose to the thistle. Yet some things remain—the separation from his fellow-men, the progress of the hidden life within, the very sense of being utterly derelict.

And this, too, remains to Maxence : that his life has ceased to unfold itself in the ordinary way ; that he can profit by a moment of recoil ; that he finds himself at the ends of the earth and at the end of Time ; that he is at the extreme limit of life, walking quite close to Eternity, into which he may stumble at any moment ; that, in consequence, he is where the only cares are lofty ones, and where the sophisms of men are of no account, because it is a question of living—

or dying ; that he has come, in short, to a part of the world where it is necessary to be in earnest, to be a man.

Thus, to begin with, the Sahara has a negative value. A vulgar soul is not worthy to attempt the problems that occupy a Pierre-Marie. Let such a soul first go and cleanse itself in the great wind that sweeps the plains, and then it will be time enough to talk of such things. First, let all those fine illusions vanish that we hold so dear, and afterwards, if there be such a thing as Truth, it will spring forth radiant from the very struggle with life. Thus was it once with Jacob wrestling with the Angel, who is Truth.

Maxence was still thinking over the lines written by Pierre-Marie, when a Moor entered his tent, and told him that a band of pillagers, laden with booty, was on its way back to the north, and would doubtless pass not far from the camp, at the spot called Tamra. Maxence lays the

weeping Virgin down upon the sand, and the wind carries her away; then he orders some dromedaries to be saddled, and dashes forward at the head of his men.

It is a mad pursuit. Behind him he is conscious of the springy steps of the camels, of the onward rush of the troop, with outstretched necks; his men jostle each other, and pass and repass, with the clash of cymbals struck by a player's hand. Through the little company he is leading runs a tremor of delight. His own teeth are set, his eyes determined. For a long time they race forward, then, at last, behold the raiders!—a mere imperceptible speck upon some rising ground. "They have halted," says a Moor. Our men redouble their efforts, and the group of raiders looms visibly larger. Suddenly, they disappear. Maxence has been sighted. The Moors, seized with panic, have taken to flight, leaving behind them an immense quantity of booty. Just at

first it is a disappointment, but soon eyes light up at sight of the capture. The followers of Maxence take possession of the numerous camels left upon the field, some of his negroes roll together the bales of cloth, while the commander shouts his orders in the midst of an indescribable confusion.

As he returned from the expedition, the young French officer felt himself very close to these Moors whom he had himself picked out from among the tribes and who had shared in the adventure. Already his life was part of their life, and his soul in touch with theirs.

Too weak as yet to live to himself alone, he turned toward this alien race. It was a strange one—marked with a sign, and of a very definite type. Of a morning, old men with harsh features would present themselves at the French tent. They had the piercing glance, the humble

gait, and the knees so swift to bend, of the Hebrew. Young men came too—young men whose fine eyes flashed with pride as they tossed back their flowing curls. Berber gentleness, Numidian pride—both are of Africa. Others of these men were of so pure an Aryan type that Maxence fancied occasionally that he had come across some Frenchman of his acquaintance. Sometimes, a warrior would present himself, proud as a beggar, but whose grave deportment, refined features, and graceful draperies proclaimed the aristocrat. He had only come to beg for a few handfuls of rice.

But those whom Maxence instinctively sought out were the contemplatives, the dreamers of the steppes, those whose flesh had been wasted and whose hearts had been weakened by fasting. One day, when he had ventured some distance from the camp, he had heard loud cries and passionate sobs, amid which he could only

distinguish the “*La Ilaha illa Allah*” of the muezzins. He had come upon some Chadelyas, disciples of the old Sheik el-Ghazouani, who were engaged in their spiritual exercises. These men, last descendants of the philosophical school founded in the tenth century by the Sheik Djazouli, were gloomy madmen — they were the monstrosities among the flowers of the desert. But the greater number of pious Moors attached themselves to the more humane sect of the Gadrias, or to that of the Tidjanias, always very favourable to us, since one of the great Mogadems of this sect, Abd-el-Kader-ben-Hamida, accompanied Colonel Flatters in 1880.

“Here too, then, dwells the spirit of man,” said Maxence to himself. “And it is a noble thing that some are found to say, like the great Ali-ben-Abou-Taleb: ‘I am the little dot placed beneath the letter *ba*,’—for the letter *ba* is the first

letter of every prayer." And the young man evoked the memory of the powerful founder of the sect called Gadria, Sidi-Abd-el-Kader-el-Djilani, who, in the depths of the Middle Ages, had taught the degrees leading up to the mystical state of perfection, from poverty, to the "madjma el Baharim," that confluence of the two seas, when the believer is so near to God that, but for the intervening space of a few perches, he would be absorbed into the Ocean of the Divinity.

Maxence could trace in these lofty ideas the influence of Alexandrinism, then that of the scholars of Andalusia, disciples of Avicenna and Averroës, who had accompanied the Moors on their return from Spain after the Conquest, and who had spread their knowledge in the Berber world. Now, nothing had changed in the Southern Sahara since those far-off times, and the traveller, as he advanced into

the desert, recognised the same odour that pervades Egyptian mausoleums, where, to this day, the mummies smile serenely under their two-thousand-year-old bandages.

So many noble dreams, so rich a growth of mysticism, flourishing right on into the twentieth century on the most inhospitable soil in the world, might well move Maxence. He had a fortifying impression of being filled with excessive zeal, of being lifted high above the round of daily mediocrity. He was on a high tower, out of reach of the sounds from the garden and the perfume of the roses ; he was like Ahasuerus, on the most distant of the terraces of Shushan, alone among the stars.

There were in this desert men of prudence who knew how to avoid both the storms of the senses and the reefs of pride. Men lived here who were neither the slaves of their lower nature, nor misers, nor blasphemers, nor men puffed out with

pride, and who said, as the Sufi said to the good rich man: "Would you like to blot out my name from among the poor by means of ten thousand drachmas?" Over yonder, in the land of his birth, Maxence remembered the leaden plain, the stifling air, the oppressive copper-coloured sky, the bitter laugh, the frequent house of ill-fame, the heavy good sense, the high falsetto tones of argument. But here, he found a holy exaltation of mind, contempt for earthly goods, knowledge of those things that are essential, discrimination of that which in reality is good from that which in reality is evil, the kingly ecstasy of an intellect that has thrown off its chains and learnt to know itself.

Over yonder, were those who made a boast of intellect, and who were perishing in consequence; but here, were the meek and the poor in spirit. Over yonder, were men who had eaten their fill and were pleased with themselves, men of expansive

smile and corpulent body. Here, brows were anxious and eyes wary, and men were prudent in face of the enemy. From these poor creatures, these heretics, captives as they were of their heresy, Maxence learnt a forcible lesson. For, though they were on the point of foundering in the sea of error, the little portion of truth they still retained flickered on his dark horizon, just as the feeble light on the captain's bridge is visible long after the hull of the vessel has disappeared from view.

His expeditions led him occasionally to the place called "the sheepfold." In this valley alone could he inhale the odour of the soil, and listen to the birds singing of their loves in the acacias. The hours are rare indeed in the country of the Moors that bring with them a perfume and a song! But already Maxence had ceased to care for them. The hours he spent in the Sheepfold were frivolous and slightly enervating hours that left him languid.

The wide green slope, smooth and undulating, its surface broken here and there by the fissure of a pond, and the lines of the stony horizon, possessed for him only an awkward grace. He did not find in them what he wanted.

What he longed for was the true desert, the true and absolute desert, in which dwelt those true men, their eyes bent upon their praying beads, of whom he had caught a glimpse on the threshold of the tribes. And he thought of austere Tiris, of the sweeping, desolate lines of the North.

On his return to the camp, he would betake himself to the ruins of Ksar, there to prolong his melancholy reveries, and sometimes a young Moor accompanied him, Ahmed, son of the Chief of the Kountas.

"This is the town," Ahmed had said to him, "where my father's father died, and where my ancestors used to dwell."

"Yes, I know," Maxence had replied.

"And the town was sacked during the war your fellow-tribesmen waged in the past against the Idouaichs. I should be glad if you would show me over it."

And they had entered the pile of ruins, crumbling under the hot sunshine. On the low, bare, stone walls, the lizards looked like other living stones, like moving gems. Spacious courtyards opened out to view. Winding alleys wound along at the foot of walls from which façades had fallen. Everywhere was silence, and that vague oppression emanating from dead things, from very ancient things, spiritualised by Time.

They walked in the narrow passages between the walls, speaking no word, listening to the gentle rustling noises underneath the stones, caused by movement imperceptible. . . .

"Here," said Ahmed, "is the house where my father dwelt."

They entered a courtyard that resembled

the others they had seen. In a corner was a low platform of earth.

"This is the spot," continued the Moor, "where the Sheik Sidi Mohammed was wont to make his salaam. And those walls to the right belong to the house of my grandfather, Sidi Mohammed-el-Kounti."

These great names of Islam were familiar to Maxence; they belonged to the glorious family of the Bekkaïa, members of whom are to be found in Touat, in Azouad, to the north of Timbuctoo, at Oualata, in Hodh, in Haribinda—in the four corners of the vast Sahara. Marvel-lous dispersion, which set the young Frenchman dreaming! For a moment, his thoughts wandered towards those distant regions that he would never see—Azaouad, Tafilalet, Iguidi, far away yonder in the rose-coloured depths of the desert, and their fine-sounding names rang feverishly in his ears. Thus, little by little,

impelled by light touches, his soul plunged ever deeper into the hidden places of the earth, burying itself in the imponderable sand.

Presently, they came upon the ruins of the mosque. Blocks of hewn stone barred the threshold; but beyond, one caught a glimpse of a kind of colonnade, open to the sky, very severe in style, without any attempt at ornamentation. Yet, for all its poverty and bareness, the sight gave real pleasure. The wide courses, the substantial columns, were in themselves an affirmation. The lines of the building, clear-cut as threads of steel, cast no shadows. An even light everywhere penetrated the confused medley of heavy pillars, but a light so subdued that their outlines were only faintly visible in the dim radiance.

While Maxence was retracing his steps, preceded by the floating garments of his guide, he thought: "The Moors make

use of the great facilities for meditation which this land so truly spiritual offers, and they produce ornaments admirably suited to its arid style of beauty. Why, then, should not we, according to our ability, convert like forces to our own peculiar needs, and try, also, to grow richer, or rather to recover our lost riches?"

And again his thoughts turned to the men of prayer—to such and such a white-bearded patriarch of his acquaintance. They seek God, and they are humble. And thus, with one and the same movement, they raise and abase themselves, and the higher they rise, the lower do they stoop. See their very gait—how prudent it is, how excessively cautious. It is because they know the path to be infested by serpents and by unclean beasts. So they must watch, and take the utmost care, and suffer no distraction to approach them, on the arid road that leads to the heights.

The winter was advancing, accompanied from time to time by tremendous squalls of wind which drove the clouds before them but did not succeed in breaking them. Occasionally, from the direction of the east, a thick haze would arise, so red, one would have sworn that behind it the Tagant was on fire. It heralded the great dry tornadoes of July. With desperate efforts, these would coil upward, whistling dismally, like a serpent that has reared itself erect and spits forth impotent rage against the stars. At other times, the gigantic whirling hurricane appeared to hesitate. Having come from so great a distance, from the depths of the Eastern Sahara, it seemed to be feeling its way over the boundless plain, and would swing for a time in moaning uncertainty, one huge circular eddy. Then, suddenly, the mad race would begin again, and the tornado would tear itself away, and lurch upward towards the low sky where the

clouds were massing themselves into enormous flakes.

But these ineffectual tempests did not make up for the heavy and oppressive hours of noon. Then a leaden silence weighed upon limbs already broken by fatigue, and the prostrate body gasped for breath, crucified upon the soil, which is its father, and from which it cannot free itself. The head too was forced to bend towards the earth, an earth dazzling as crystal and of metallic hardness, there to await, bathed in perspiration, a cooler atmosphere.

Maxence was forced to undergo the torture of these hours. He learnt that each minute can so buffet a man, first on that side, then on this, that at last, blinded and stunned, he cries for mercy. He endured the sting of minute after minute, merging into day after day. He knew also the terrors of sleepless nights when, tossing and turning on his mat like a

pancake in the frying-pan, he would let a groan escape him, which however did not penetrate the canvas of his tent, that flapped and creaked in the night wind. The wind was the real wall, separating him even from his men, who but a few paces distant were rolled up from their heads to their knees in their camp blankets.

Thus, far from everything, lost somewhere on one of those circles that geographers trace on the map of the world, no longer even aware of his latitude, fully conscious of the irony of this painful living death of Africa, of this void that produces nothing but the lotus flower of suffering, of this void in which the soul is no longer confused by the noises of the world, but knows herself for what she is worth—Maxence, fainting under his long endurance of the night, was very near to a great and salutary despair.

These trials were not without their

value; where indeed is the trial that is not of use? Maxence issued forth from them prouder, more at home in his desert, of greater moral worth. He buckled his helmet on firmly, draped himself in Arab robes so that he looked like a young Roman clad in the tunic of the patricians, and fixed his gaze on men and things with closer attention and a clearerer insight.

Meanwhile, the end of September was approaching. The air grew lighter and regained its fluidity. The black kites flew higher and higher still, before swooping down upon the abandoned carcases of the sheep. It was a sign that the torrid season was nearing its end, and that soon it would be possible to start off on fresh adventures over the borderless paths and desolate plains of the north.

Fearlessly, Maxence contemplated beforehand all the hardships of these forthcoming expeditions. He had no illusions as to the lot that he had chosen. As

Pizarro, at the foot of the highlands of Mexico, traced on the sand with the end of his stick a line separating the life of ease from the life of toil, and then turned back to his companions, even so did the Genius who presided over Africa pause and measure the ground. "There, beyond this line," said the Genius, "are care and tribulation, but with the certainty of moral growth; and here, within this same line, is a life of ease and effeminacy, with the certainty of deterioration." But Maxence did not hesitate. Called to a high destiny, he precipitated himself towards the greatness he had chosen. And by this very choice he began to know himself; he set himself down as a term of the equation, and was enabled to judge better what value to attach to those imaginative dreams of the Sahara of which he had been so interested a witness.

"What, in your opinion, is the true purpose of life?" he inquired one day of

the young Moor who had guided him through the ruins of Ksar.

"To copy the Book diligently and to meditate on the Hadith, for it is written : 'The ink of scholars is precious, more precious even than the blood of martyrs.' "

But was it really to be admired, this feverish pursuit of divine knowledge? Maxence asked himself. There was something in his companion's answer that revolted him. He touched the weak spot, detected the bluntness of the weapon's point. Was not his whole life based upon sacrifice; and although, indeed, he was ignorant of its supernatural virtue, did it not light up his every act with the reflection of its own mysterious brilliance? Despicable as he knew himself to be, he yet realised that he was the superior of those who preferred the goose-quill of the writer to the palm of the martyr. For in the lowest depths of his misery he yet bore within him the germ of life, while

they, on the contrary, concealed beneath their outward grandeur the germ of death.

What would have become of our Western civilisations, Maxence asked himself, if they had been built up on a morality such as this?—if the sovereignty of the heart had not been proclaimed?—if the theologian in his remote cell, with his folios around him, had not sent the Crusader, his cross upon his breast, along the flaming roadways of the East? And Maxence knew himself to be the heir of those civilisations, and the envoy, the standard-bearer of Western power. Thus, the days of his probation being over, the young traveller began to realise the greatness of his mission, and the gentle sway of its law.

He was greater than the Moors. He was greater than himself. He, poor unhappy man with no star to guide him, this mocking and sarcastic Maxence, was greater even than Djilani with all his

virtue. And now a young Moor had revealed to him his own greatness, and with a single sentence had loosed the chains of his captivity !

"The ink of scholars is more agreeable to God than the blood of martyrs." It is the very depth to which our neighbour has sunk that makes us realise our own height. For then, finding ourselves touching the bottom of the sea, we act like the diver caught in the seaweed, who frees himself with a vigorous kick, and rises once again with outstretched arms towards the light of the upper world. So Maxence : he has indeed admired them, these Moors, men whose inner life has all the strange sweet savour of a wild fruit. But to-day he can feel nothing but a great pity for the lamentable victims around him—these victims of a civilisation that has lost its bearings.

What matter if Maxence be unhappy, what matter if he be bad ? He is the

envoy of Western power. Pure and unalloyed he must perforce remain by the very fact of his race, and separated from all the others. He cannot help himself: twenty centuries of Christianity separate him from the Moors. The power whose badge he wears has reconquered the sands from the Crescent of Islam, and on her shoulders she carries the heavy Cross. She who conquered the land on which Maxence is standing, here, on this very spot, is carrying her Cross, and it is the Cross of Jesus Christ. All through her long and troubled existence she has been laden with the weight of her own sins. She is the power sprung from her own Christianity, triumphant and suffering. How is it Maxence has not recognised her? Why does he not greet her, for like him she suffers, groaning under the blast of malediction, as he has groaned under the blast of pain? She has said: "This land of Africa is mine, and I give

it to my children. It does not belong to these poor people, these shepherds, these keepers of camels. It belongs to me, not to these slaves. And I give it to my sons in order that they may honour me more highly."

"It belongs to me." Maxence can understand this language. He is the master. He knows well that he must not leave too much of himself in these latitudes. Does he who is rich borrow from him whose whole fortune is one little sheep? He is the master of the land. Does the master ask advice of the servant? He is the envoy of a people that knows full well the value of the blood of martyrs. And well too does he know what it is to die for an idea. He has behind him twenty thousand crusaders—a whole people who died with a drawn sword in the hand and a prayer upon the lips. He is the child of that race. Not in vain has he lived through the first

painful hours of exile, not in vain has the sun scorched him, and solitude folded him in her great shroud of silence. He is the child of suffering.

"You are not the first," says a voice that he used not to know—the voice of the mother he has cursed. "You are not the first whom I have sent to this infidel land. I have sent others before you. For this land belongs to me, and I give it to my sons that they may suffer in it, and on its soil may learn suffering. Others have died here before you. And they did not ask these slaves to teach them how to live. But they held their hearts open, for all to see. Look, O my son, and see how they bore themselves in this great enterprise, this great French adventure, which was the adventure of the Pilgrimage of the Cross."

### III

## Per Speculum in Ænigmata

The departure—Calm of Maxence—Insistence—The grandeur of Zli—Movements of the heart, beating of wings in the night—The fidelity of soldiers—What is passing in Heaven—The associations of Zli: the field of Amatil—The twofold aspect of the soul of Maxence and its real unity—The enigma of the mirror that is Man.

**M**AXENCE rose one day by the clear, transparent light of morning, in one of those moods of heroic rapture which yet leave the mind in all its wonted agility. He sprang up, shook himself and stood erect, his legs planted firmly apart, waiting for his corporals and sergeants. Just as the rallying bugle-call fills the farthest limits of the plain, piercing even to the most hidden corners

of the wood, so did winged, victorious joy fill his whole being. From the camp, the ever-increasing uproar among the black mass of troops rose to greet the impatient commander. For, on the previous evening, the order had come to start for the distant Adrar, and this present hour was one of those hours of departure that are a figure of youth.

Maxence, then, has received an order, and now he in his turn is giving orders which others are taking ; for the profession of the soldier consists essentially in obeying and commanding. To each is allotted a task in accordance with his rank. The directions descend to minutest details—from a bowl of rice due here, to a pack-saddle there in need of mending—and all are carried out in proper rotation, according to a plan existing only in the mind of the commander; until at last, every need foreseen and all contingencies provided for, the column sways forward into

space, like a fully rigged vessel standing out to sea. Henceforth, each soldier, following the man in front of him, has only to march along his narrow strip of sand—which, narrow as it is, means life to him, for on either side lies the desert where men die of thirst. The guide steers straight for the well, since there is no path except the one he himself makes. Let the others follow him closely and hug his shadow! Maxence, for his part, is taking a rest. Everything is in working order, and he has nothing left to do but gaze upon the beautiful world breaking at his feet in great, deep, solemn waves.

Singularly calm and sure of himself is Maxence, on this plain which is withering under the flaming and majestic sunshine. See him now, on the first evening, stretched on his mat and smoking his pipe in silence; yielding himself up to the dizzy spell of the night, that causes

him to forget for the time being the absolute emptiness of the desert. On the ground yonder, the tirailleurs form a geometrical diagram that neither breathes nor stirs. Only a few Moors, talking round a fire, and the sentry, whose entire profile, from his head to his feet, stands out against the sky like a picture, are left. He hears the sound of the camels chewing the cud close to him ; every now and then one ceases to munch, and stretches out its long neck on the cool earth with a movement of lassitude. An everyday, familiar scene enough ! Maxence had been twenty-two years old when he had experienced for the first time the bitter-sweet sensation of thus halting for a single night, only to move on again next day. And certain though it seems at the time that the frail memory will retain no trace of these transitory encampments, yet in the end their delicate and secret charm haunts the whole of life.

The halt this evening is exactly similar to the first halt. Everything appears delightful to this young brain. Maxence pats his dog. He feels that life is actually in front of him, real, certain, no fiction, but a profound reality which he can lay hold of and measure. On the horizon, the stately Scorpion rises into view, and begins its slanting march across the sky. "To-morrow morning," says Maxence, "towards two o'clock, the advancing wing of this flaming constellation will have traversed three-quarters of the heavens. But has not the earth too her own exact position on the free and open roads of the firmament?"

He is acting his part in the heavenly play with a feeling of complete security. And he is not uneasy, because he has not yet felt the prick of the spur, goading him to ask himself: "Where am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of this enigma that I am?" He is

not uneasy, because he has never been stung by questions such as these : "What, then, is this horrible joke ? What stage is this on which I weep behind a laughing mask ?"

No ! He knows nothing of the immortal uneasiness of a heart that realises its own needs. On the contrary, the play of his thought is so peaceful, so like those great rivers which he has forgotten, and the current of his dreams flows on with such a force, that it is long since he remembers to have felt so happy. In truth, during his stay at Ksar-el-Barka, did he not make great concessions to God, did he not go to the extreme limit of what it is possible to accord ? It is only just that such striking condescension should obtain for him some pleasures in return. The Moors have made him realise how pure and wholesome is the Christian air one breathes in France—in that France which he had cursed at the

very moment when he left her, perhaps for ever. They have given him a glimpse of the hidden France he has disowned; they have put words of filial gratitude upon his lips, instead of words of base repudiation. He is happy as a lost child who has once more found its mother. Why, then, should the wearied intellect pursue its uneasy search? Why should it not cast anchor in those beautiful earthly harbours that offer so fair a refuge to those whom life has tired?

Yet, for all his noble detachment, warnings came to trouble Maxence. Everything conspired to destroy that peace of mind in which he fancied he might rest secure, quite oblivious of the fact that, in the desert, thought is apt to gain in depth what it loses in range.

The guide of the column was called Mohammed Fadel-ben-Mohammed-Rou-tam: the name speaks for itself. It was the great-nephew of Ma-el-Aïnin, the well-

known scholar, an irreconcilable adversary of France, and the nephew of Taquialla, the Mogaddem of the Fadelyas of Adrar, who was leading the young officer through the stony, dark recesses of these dead lands. This man was truly our friend. His mind had great charm, and he was as widely cultivated as a Moor can be. Maxence used gladly to talk with him of an evening under the vast sky into which the narrow circle of the earth was vanishing.

One evening the Moor said :

"What do you call those four big stars and those three little ones, moving across the sky like a mounted vanguard in the desert?"

"We call them Orion. But tell me the name you give them in your language."

"That constellation, Lieutenant, is called the 'medjbour.' Not far off, you see a wide dusty road, and that is the 'path of Bourak,' for Bourak was the

messenger's horse, and that path is the one he traced in dazzling space when his master had resolved to quit this miserable world. Glory to God alone!"

A heavy silence followed, widening the abyss between the two men. Then :

"Is it true?" said Moham̄med Fadel, "that you, the Nazarenes, believe in three Gods, and not in One only?"

Maxence brushed away the importunate question with the back of his hand, as though it had been a troublesome fly.

"As to me, Sheik . . ." (Then he changed his mind.) "That is to say, I . . . it is difficult to explain this to you in Arabic. . . . But certainly we do not believe in several gods, like the Bambaras, but in One God. . . ."

A thousand instances of this kind were continually bringing him back to the central point. Meanwhile, every stage of the journey gave some fresh indication of the nearing proximity of the Adrar.

At Hassi-el-Argoub, the travellers came upon some tents belonging to Ouled Selmoun. Henceforth, until they reached their destination, they were to meet no human being. The region does not admit of them. It admits of nothing except lofty thoughts, thoughts of glory and heroic virtue and manly pride, and even the faces of our brothers would seem to us intolerable amid such surroundings. These very thoughts are not sufficiently pure. Only a strain of heavenly music would not seem incongruous. And the farther the road advanced towards the north, the greater was the sense of oppression produced by all the Circles of this Inferno, winding steeply down as though in strange haste to reach the bottom of the long spiral of the abyss. Maxence went dizzily forward through this singular landscape, drops of perspiration on his brow, and his heart beating with impatience.

The half-way point in the long descent is the spring of Zli. The evening before attaining it, the column was caught in one of those formidable sand-storms so frequent in the Sahara. Then, indeed, the wind seems to be trying to break its own record, and deals blow after blow with the precipitous rage of a mad ram. Then, muffled in his scorching woollen haïk, a man witnesses the death of the sky above him; he is caught up in the swirling, formless clouds, he is surrounded by elemental Force.

But Maxence—Maxence stands erect in the leaping flame, his arms folded; defying the bombardment of the sands. “Wash, O Wind,” he says, “wash away all that is not pure grandeur! Tear the soil from the mountains, tear from them all that is but accessory and additional! Let only the bare mineral form remain! And may the angles of my heart too be laid bare, until it stand forth naked as the round

smooth stone that you have been rolling before you since the beginning of time."

How grand is Zli! Imperceptibly, you climb the gentle ascent of tangled white dunes where meagre titariks have succeeded in gaining a foothold. Then the sand comes to an end, and all vegetation ceases. Next, you cross an irregular ridge, and stone—the coal-black, rugged, wrinkled stone of the Adrar—surrounds you on every side. This is, in truth, the door of the Adrar, the entrance that leads to its very heart, to the innermost recesses of this great granitic upheaval.

Henceforth, one is in the midst of silence and of death. In its sombre circular chasms, which resemble the *bolge* of Dante, there is not a tree, not a blade of grass. Now Zli is the lowest chasm, the abode, pre-eminently, of terror and despair. On every side, black walls with unexplored recesses shut out the horizon; and here and there, a huge isolated mass

looms up at the gloomy cross-ways, like one of those heaps of pulverised coal to be seen at the approaches of railway stations and factories. Everything is silent—everything except the wind. For this is the very spot where the wind has its origin, the workshop where it is prepared, its principal storehouse.

Standing alone at the centre of the system, thrilled with poetic passion and rapturous exaltation, Maxence feels that not only is he at the centre, but that he himself is the centre. He is the central spirit that animates the lifeless lump, he is the intelligence at work behind this huge mass of heavy matter.

The earth is lashed by every wind of heaven, and swept by deadly gusts. Look at her! She is one perpetual groan, one imprisoned lament. She is skinned, cleansed, washed and re-washed, scraped to the bone by the great gusts of wind which, like tongues of fire, lick her ancient

wrinkled skin, and kill the vegetation, and the very stone, and the whole order of nature. And yet this earth is *his* earth, it belongs to him, it belongs to a man—this miserable, bare rind, that has cast away all life from its bosom.

Halting here, on his way to unknown lands, our traveller discovers in his own heart too vast tracts of unexplored country. Amid all this desolation—that of the world, that of his own heart—he feels at ease; he is at home in it, lord of his own domain. Very natural to him is this desolation. Rather is it the mud of cities, the crowded promenade beside the river, the modern town itself, that does not seem to belong to him.

Then, again, the exacting nature of this soil tolerates none but soldiers; and it is here, far from foundries and from warehouses, that they will learn to know each other, and, this once learnt, will sing with joy at their deliverance. Here, in the

very crucified immobility of the earth, they find once more the virtues that they love and bless—simplicity, a rough austerity. Glorious discovery! Now that he is far from Progress and the illusions of Change, Maxence is conscious of being once again a man of fidelity. He can detect nothing within him that in any way resembles revolt; on the contrary, firmly linked to the great things of the world, he loves his habitual chains. He is subject to the law of gravitation of the moral world, and it is as natural for him to yield to it as it is for the stars to follow their appointed courses across the fields of heaven.

To this true soldier, nothing looks beautiful except Fidelity. She alone is peace and consolation. She alone reconciles him to the bitter draught of solitude. She alone stands high above him. Fidelity is a sure shelter. She is a sweet thought that greets the traveller. She is that indescribable, that incomparable

fragrance perceptible only to the soul of the soldier. Fidelity is like the wife watching for her husband's return from the Crusade : she never loses hope, she never forgets. Fidelity never doubts of the future, never doubts of the past. She is the little lamp that the wife holds in her hand—the little lamp whose flame is always even.

But here a thought comes to Maxence—to Maxence, that faithful knight. Does he not know what it is to Serve, to be the man on whom the commander relies, the loyal servant who adheres strictly to the precept, and obeys the order? A thought, then, comes to him—comes from a far, far distance—or rather, he is conscious of a feeling of uneasiness, and for this reason: Why, if he is a soldier of fidelity, why has he acquiesced in such numerous surrenders, why been guilty of so many denials? Why, if he detests Progress, does he reject Rome, the rock of all fidelity? And if he looks upon the

unchanging sword with love, why does he turn his eyes away from the unchanging Cross? "So ridiculous is this infidelity," Maxence confesses to himself, "that I dare not even acknowledge it before the Moors, and I say to them, 'We believe! . . .' Ah yes! my cowardice, when confronted by them, makes me understand how closely, in spite of myself and as it were unknown to me, Jesus binds me to Him."

Maxence is nearing that point when compromises appear despicable, and when a man is forced to make his choice. Either he will reject authority, and the foundation of authority, which is the Army, or else he will accept authority in its entirety, human and Divine. A man of fidelity, he will not remain outside fidelity. In the system of order, we find the priest and we find the soldier. In the system of disorder, there is no priest and no soldier. He will choose, then, one or the other.

But in the system of order all things are linked together. As France cannot reject the Cross of Christ, so the Army cannot reject France. And the priest can no more deny the soldier than the soldier the priest. And the centurion recognises Jesus Christ on the tree of the Cross, just as Jesus Christ recognises the centurion.

In the same way, too, everything is linked together in the system of disorder. Therefore, reasons Maxence, a man must either be a man of denial or a man of fidelity. He must throw in his lot with those who rebel, or he must range himself against them. But what can he do if the intellect remains powerless to grasp the object of fidelity?

Thus the young man pondered as, leaning on his elbow in that distant land, he contemplated the tremulous movement of the air above the motionless plain. Now, at that precise moment, what was passing in the heights of heaven, in the abode of

Him whose searching glance detects the most secret movement of the soul? While Maxence raised his thoughts, still vacillating, towards the Son whom he had denied, what was passing in the abode of the Father?

Ah! that is a forbidden mystery, and the human mind reels and falters if it tries to penetrate into the actual scene of the drama, into that place of eternal refreshment, where abides the Unique and Substantial Reality. Let our poor human thoughts, however, venture near the edge of the abyss, and we shall see the Master of innumerable worlds leaning over the earth He willed should be so beautiful, and over which He is rejoicing in eternity. For He has chosen her from out all others, and He delights in her more than in the millions of the stars around Him, and in her He takes His rest—in her, to whom He sent His Son.

Behold, then, the Master, as, singling

her out from among all others, He bends over our world, and contemplates the souls that He has made in His own Image. In His ardent thirst to give Himself to men, in His unutterable desire to belong to them, He grows impatient, and He watches for the very faintest sign of good-will, quite ready, since He is Love itself, to go forth to meet the soul the farthest from Him, if only she be worthy of His compassion. Meanwhile, the prayers of the Saints rise up to Him, and encompass Him on every side, and importune Him, as He Himself has willed they should, and do Him that violence which He loves above all other things. And from time to time the glance of mercy falls upon the dark and sorrowful earth—that glance which is the joy of angels, and the unspeakable beatitude of the celestial hierarchies.

"I was found," says God, "of them that sought Me not. I was made manifest

unto them that asked not after Me. And it is I, O young soldier, who will make the first step. This humble submission, this love of fidelity, suffices Me. I ask for nothing more. I will call you to Me from a far distance, and I will love you with My everlasting love. I will mark you with the sign of My election. It is all I need —this almost imperceptible movement of an honest heart. For am I not the Father, and who can measure the tenderness of the Father? A father, when he hears the first lisplings of his child, exclaims in wonder over its intelligence, and finds in every little act some excuse for praise. I am that Father. I am the Father of all those souls who are upright and poor, lonely and unhappy—I am their Father, and I love them best of all My children."

Ah, sweet indeed would this adoption seem to Maxence, did he but know of it! But he is on the high-roads of the world,

his head bent to meet the force of the wind, and he does not even dream of asking Heaven for the help which God, in the secrecy of His designs, has already promised him.

His loins were girt about with the desert. It was from the desert that he drew all his strength, of the desert that he demanded virtue. And, of a truth, seeing himself protected by the immense depths of sand, with all his heart he blessed his destiny. "I might have been like those men of the world," he said to himself, "so pleasing in their fashionable clothes, like those elegant individuals whose artistic mode of speech I used formerly to admire, or those others who pose as being refined, but who in reality are coarser than hogs under their masks of politeness. I might have been a drawing-room man, or a wit, or an insufferably fastidious person. Oh, blessed be Africa which has saved me from such a destiny! Blessed be the land

that is true, the land that is truly fastidious, and that preserves her sons from contact with all that is vulgar! Blessed be my deliverance for ever from the men of falsehood and iniquity! From morning until evening I will bless thee, O venerable, virgin land of Africa! On thee no man has laid his hand, and thou alone hast remained pure. . . .”

Maxence felt that not a single hour of his was wasted. There was not one that did not bear its fruit, that was not laden with some meditation or some profitable task. Nothing, in fact, came to trouble the wonderful development and growth of the interior life that Africa reserves for her elect.

When the column was only a few stages from Atar, the thoughts of Maxence took a fresh turn. They had halted at Djouali, at Chommat, at Tifoujar—unimportant places, yet all marked by drops of French blood. At length, in the first days of

March, they reached the dunes of Amatil, where they encamped for some days. It was among these dunes, on the 30th and 31st of December 1908, that the followers of Ma-el-Aïnin, alarmed by our march towards the Adrar, made their first serious attempt against our troops.

In the resplendent glow of noon, Maxence salutes magniloquently the scene of the great struggle of 1909, to-day more silent than the Pole. The shelter where he is about to stretch himself is near the bastion where our machine-guns were placed, but there is nothing left to-day of this bastion except wide hedges of thorny branches, more than half covered by the sand. Over the surrounding landscape lies the hush of death ; all is deeply buried in the past.

A tirailleur, a young Samoko, is with Maxence. He took part in the fight, and buried our dead under the enemy's fire, for which act of courage he had been made

a Tirailleur of the First Class. His memories are confused. He tells of the heap of dead in the bastion, and of the French sergeant carrying the machine-guns on his back ; as though still deafened by the din of battle, he speaks of the cries of the women who had come stamping over from Atar, and who, from the central ridge of the mountain, urged their husbands on in the fight.

This is enough for Maxence. Such language is familiar to him. He knows what these African engagements are : two lines facing each other, in full sight of each other, hurling insults in the midst of a formidable hailstorm of bullets, joy and hate written plainly on every face, the glorious sunshine streaming down on all, and the commander with bared breast endeavouring to make himself heard above the tumult—in a word, the high military colouring, the grand manner so redolent of epic beauty. He knows all

this, and he prefers to these glowing memories the humble cemetery where his comrades lie. There, rustic crosses inscribed with names mark the resting-places of those who fell. Other graves—without cross and without name—are those of the Senegalese, and these are lined up in close order, just as at the moment of the march past. And Maxence stands, thoughtful and in silence, before the anonymous dust of the past, striving to discover its true significance. He reads the names of his comrades, he breathes the exhilarating atmosphere of fraternity. This hour too is no wasted one for him ; it involves him still more deeply in the ancient covenant, in the mysterious communion of the shedding of blood.

Alone, amid the splendid outer peace so fraught with inner tumult of this elemental landscape, Maxence renews the pact that binds him. He proclaims himself a soldier for all eternity, and he

promises that in the great common adventure in which all—dead and living—are engaged, he will be the bravest, the most eager in the fray, the most prodigal of his body. He is one in thought, one in will, with those whose spirits still survive although their flesh has been consumed by the sun. Solemnly, he affirms that he will be loyal and veracious, that he will renounce everything—wealth, family, life itself—in order to fulfil the task allotted to him; and to these shades, in this remote and lonely corner of the earth, he reveals his very soul, bare, destitute, yet which has already vanquished the world.

The speed of the conquest rises up before his mind with importunate reality, making him bite his lips. He reverts in spirit to the 10th December 1908 at Moudjéria. "Never shall the French enter the Adrar," said the Moors. But on the 5th of January, five hundred

Senegalese, under our orders, entered Atar after a march of a hundred leagues, bristling with difficulties. Some days before, the resistance had been broken at Amatil, then at Hamdoun, where the cannonade had promptly cleared the ground. The ten months that followed saw our columns flying to the four corners of the desert, the tribes coming to throw down their arms at Atar, the methodical establishment in all directions of the French Peace, the mad imprudence of our offensive, and the wise prudence of our territorial organisation, our unceasing endeavour to give an example of our justice after having given an example of our strength. Roman annals, worthy of Cæsar! Splendid page of history, too little known! But France is so rich in glory that she can afford to neglect small change like this.

This is the work that Maxence is to continue. This is the living reality in

which he is engaged, taking his place in it as the race-horse takes up its position on the course, prepared to follow the track. The task that presents itself to him has the characteristic French clearness and definiteness. The work is there, just as it has been handed down by the authorities, and just so, and not otherwise, it must be accomplished, in accordance with the instructions of his superiors. The territory that opens out before him, from its very nature lays down certain conditions at the outset: self-abnegation, steady application, a vigorous arm and a sound mind.

Thus, in the fields of Amatil, the intentions of the young soldier are simple. If he had leisure to recall the fervent days of Zli, he might perhaps wonder that his thoughts, which for one brief moment had been soaring in the azure sky, should return so promptly to these narrow lists where it is his duty to fight; he might

wonder too that, having once caught a glimpse of true submission and obedience, he could content himself a short time afterwards with the image of submission and the mere symbol of obedience; and that, having sought a law to which he could submit at Zli, he should subject himself so easily to that offered him by Amatil. But Maxence is a soldier before all things. Moreover, his starting-point is none other than the human task assigned to him. Then, too, during his journey from the Tagant to the Adrar, Africa has revealed herself to him under her two aspects, and one is that of Prayer, the other that of Action. Here, clothed in fine linen, and there, girt with armour; here, with a golden aureole, there, with a casque of steel—in such guise does his ancient counsellor appear to the young soldier. And he—now humble in face of Heaven, now proud in face of earth; now uneasy when the blue sky fades

from view, now reassured by the great possessions of the world; now feeling very small when he remembers all he has not got, now very great because of what he has—Maxence too walks with divided heart under the twofold aspect of Africa.

Yet, *in medio leporum*, from the very bosom of earthly happiness springs a mortal disquiet. “Of a truth,” says the uneasy soul, “the duty which guides my steps and orders my actions is clearly enough laid down. But, for all that, it seems to me that my steps are somewhat wavering, and that my actions resemble the actions of a dream. I am like the fish accustomed to steer itself through the element of water, and that yet will never really know the sea, because it cannot contemplate it from the shore. My strength would not fail me were I not haunted by a longing for the perfect harmony, did I not want to dominate the

element in which the body that I bear about with me has to move. But I am a thinking as well as an acting being. And the intellect starts up and wants to know ; and then, poor indeed looks the route marked out for the soldier ! ”

And yet the soldier is great by reason of the reality of which he is the image. Maxence, before the graves of Amatil, is a distant image of Fidelity. And for this reason, his share in the task allotted to him is pleasing to God. His very ignorance is his most precious asset. For the intellect that has sold itself to be the slave of Falsehood has pronounced its own condemnation. But, on the contrary, that intellect remains worthy of Truth which is merely slumbering under the burden of human duty, and which has not time to think because it is so occupied with a life of pure action. There is not so great a distance between ignorance and knowledge as there is between false know-

ledge and true knowledge. Loyalty to France quickly leads to loyalty to Christ, whereas disloyalty only leads to disloyalty. So with Maxence: he is good and veracious, and therefore that which is good and veracious is his portion, while iniquity belongs to the man of iniquity. And when, his naked sword thrust deep into the soil, he swears upon the ashes of his comrades to be a good and faithful servant, he is already in some sort a Christian, and already has a share in the grace of Holy Church.

## IV

### The Spirit of the Storm

Picture of Atar—The *Sourat* of the Infidels, and the answer of the Church—But this answer does not suffice—The Intellect asserts itself—Maxence desires Truth above all things—Disorder, which proves the need of a Rule that is effective, and that carries with it the pledge of certainty—Maxence discovers in the *oppidum* of Atar the reasons of his state of soul—Latin majesty and Christian dignity.

WOMEN in the palm-grove, in groups of two and three. Their eyes, circled with kohl, dwell languidly on the blue shadows. At the wells, black slaves toil at the creaking beam, and the water rises and spreads in the round basin. Now and again, a burst of laughter rings out as clearly as under a glass roof on a summer's day. All the perfumes of

the terraces of Persia seem to meet in the oasis—an imperceptible point in space, as pleasure is an imperceptible point in time.

The circle is broken in which Maxence has been living. The young soldier is no longer the man who, protected by the double breastplate of solitude and silence, marches unhesitatingly towards his goal, advancing in a straight line along the diameter of the circular horizon; rather is he the casual pedestrian who has broken the rules, and who wanders wherever his humour takes him. Other young men are with him, and the slothful, empty hours glide by in futile chatter. By the very relaxation, the inertia of his whole being, Maxence can gauge the intensity of his fatigue. He is conscious of a truce—that dangerous moment when the soul is on the point of abdicating and of renouncing its authority, that insidious slope leading to the inevitable catastrophe, that

surrender of the will which is only too familiar to him, and which has this for its result—that no bitterness, no feeling of repulsion will ever avail to fill the huge black hole caused by the fall. Thus, for three days, does Maxence walk as though asleep in the shadow of death.

On the last evening, however, demoralised and unsociable, he leaves his comrades, and goes towards the town, so full of wretchedness. It is the hour when the flocks of sheep come thronging home; when the children, of proud bearing and charming aspect, raise the last shouts that immediately precede the silence of the night. Ruined walls enclose the narrow circle that is tightly packed with houses of equal height, and only with difficulty do the little alleys succeed in piercing the compact masses of stone. On his right, Maxence watches the last rays of the sun playing on the high ridges of the Adrar, and pauses, drawing a deep

breath, as he notices the short-lived flush of colour that succeeds the colourless domination of the sun. The rocks are red, the palms intensely green, and the sands of an ochre tint. Only the stones of the Ksar, covered with the dust of centuries, retain their indistinct and greyish hue. It is evening, when every minute counts, and every second strikes a note that one would wish prolonged for ever. Man is in full contact with the world, he is like a gong ringing under the gentle blows of Time, the waves of metallic sound widening and swelling in conformity with mathematical laws.

Already stronger, soothed by the peaceful harmonies, Maxence saunters into the small streets that open out before him invitingly. Above him, the terraces are fenced with thorn-bushes set at a uniform height from the ground, and, between the dry branches, a winding, narrow ribbon of sky alone marks out the line of the

path. But a pungent odour catches the traveller's throat. Behind the low doors, he has a glimpse of little courtyards, where thousands of ravenous flies are attacking the women and children, quite unconcerned among the calabashes. Surely, he must be in a ghetto! A prey to vague uneasiness, he hastens to gain the open. Every now and then, the sight of some lightly veiled and loitering beauty completes the illusion. Decidedly, Maxence is in a Jewish quarter. For that matter, the inhabitants of Atar, for the most part Smassides, are the lowest of the Moors, and cannot be compared to the true Berbers, who dwell in tents of camel-skin in the remotest parts of the desert.

No light shines out to pierce the shadow; no friendly door will open. No hand will be stretched forth. . . . Maxence shivers; his heart, suddenly struck with terror, ceases to beat: is he not a stranger on the earth, not only here, but

everywhere? Is there a single spot in the world where he can say: "Here is the end of the journey; here, on this soil, everything belongs to me; and here are the brothers of my thoughts and of my prayers"? No matter to what corner of the globe he goes, he is alone, revolving round his sins that are hidden from the world; he is the accursed one, outside the circle of sweet human fellowship.

But just as the ill-fated Maxence feels everything about him foundering, voices issue from the thick walls of a mosque. It is the hour when all Islam chants the *Sourat* of the Infidels, and Maxence slowly repeats the sombre prayer, which he has read in the Book: "*Souratoul el koufar*. . . . Say, O infidels! I shall not adore what you adore. You will not adore what I adore. I abhor your worship. You have your religion, and I have mine."

A mysterious pain grips Maxence.

This cry of pride and isolation rings through him. He feels there is a force in it that dominates all misery, a beauty that is stronger than circumstances. Yet the words these people use are not for him. Why can he not say to them with exulting certainty :

" You do not know the words of life, O lying voices ! You have your religion. But I—I have mine. You have your Prophet, but I have my God, who is Christ Jesus. You have your Book, but I have mine. . . . "

Is it possible ? But already in his peril he is saying it, forgetting the internal quarrels of the schools. Face to face with the Arab, he is a Frank, holding fast to the certitude that his race has been for ever consecrated, and, under the prick of shame, he calls himself the son (a prodigal son, indeed!) of his Church. For his name is linked for ever to the name of Christian. And what should be his pride,

when confronted by the Moor, if not a Catholic pride?

Thus, in his gesture of defence, he has a vision of the Church of God, bending over France protectingly throughout the ages, and he must next go on to consider that which they have done together in the great part which they have played in common. First, in the very beginning of history, he sees the peaceful procession issuing from the portals, and the hand raised in a gesture of benediction over an appalling world. For, in the midst of crime and iniquity, all through the great wars of devastation, the bishop stands erect, his feet upon the immovable rock, arresting with his two uplifted fingers the howling mob and the barbarian invaders. Alone, high above the sombre landscape and the ruined buildings, the monastery mounts guard over the imperishable treasure confided to its keeping, in order that the little flickering lamp of the spirit

may not be quenched, nor justice utterly abolished. The infallible utterance of the Lateran hovers above the world like a white dove above a charnel-house. Savage emperors and kings are vanquished by the mere voice of the white-haired old man in far-off Rome, and the monk in his cell watches over the justification of the people of God. Yes, throughout the ages, the Church has bent protectingly over France, weeping with her, rejoicing with her.

Then, years pass by, and the nation grows, and takes its place among the other faithful nations, the peoples of fidelity. Behold the men of your right hand, O Lord! Now is unrolled the noblest history that the centuries have ever written. The most beautiful kingdom in the world, and it is also the Kingdom of Fidelity. The most glorious power in the world, and it is also a Christian power. These are your sons,

O Lord, the bravest and the proudest—but they are sons who render exact obedience, and they are the children of Your love. Well does Maxence know it, that wonderful history, whose every page, even the very darkest, bears testimony to its greatness.

Now, where is France? the young soldier asks himself. Where is France, if not at Reims, whose triple portal still seems to open to the royal procession, and at St. Denis, with the tombs that are a part of our glory—and again at Chartres, redolent of Paschal joy; and under that protective nave which, it is said, delights the Queen of Heaven; and even in those country belfries that alone have seen the ceaseless flux of generations? For it is not saying much to assert that the spire, high above the surrounding country, commands the expanse beneath, and is, as it were, the centre of Space. The spire is more particularly to be regarded as the

organiser of Time, and the centuries group themselves about it even better than the earthly landscapes and the innumerable roofs of the town. It is the Present, standing between the Past and the Future, much more than it is the point in space to which converge all the lines of the horizon. It is, then, towards the spire that those souls will wing their way who desire to enter into the very heart of their country. But what will they say, these sincere souls, when, in the darkest chapel of the choir, just behind the high altar, they discover the rightful heiress to the Kingdom—discover, too, that to deny Christianity is in a way to deny France? Then the gates of History will open, and France—that France, every fold of whose long story is a miracle—will appear to these inquirers, shining with an admirable radiance.

This vision in the fetid hole of Atar of Our Lady's chosen and most regal shrines

might well have consoled Maxence. But no! His heart is fretted by a dull anxiety. Let those who are weak sustain themselves by noble dreams! But as for him, it is Truth that he demands with violence. A lofty, intellectual enthusiasm urges him on, and this fever of mind will not suffer him to rest till he possess the veritable Truth, the calm serenity of well-grounded reason.

He demands in the first place that Jesus Christ should be in very fact the Word of God, that the Church should be with absolute certainty the infallible guardian of the Truth, that Mary should in sober reality be Queen of Heaven. This is his first requirement before he goes on to consider the marvellous vocation and election of France. Never will the sky of Africa, never will this soil, so impregnated with military traditions, counsel cowardice or excessive prudence. Sky and soil alike are the very acme of certitude, the glorifi-

cation of the Absolute. And that indeed is the lesson which the passer-by may learn from the imperious voice of the mosque: "O Infidels! you have your religion and I have mine, and I shall not adore what you adore." Which is to say: Nothing is beautiful but Truth. Nothing is worthy of a free man but Love, or the hatred of Love. And again: May the nave of Notre-Dame itself be for ever demolished, if Mary is not truly Our Lady and our veritable Queen. May this France perish, may these twenty centuries of Christianity be for ever blotted out from history, if Christianity is a lie. May this Christian France be cursed, if she has been built up on error and iniquity. "I will not adore what you adore." The whole question, then, is whether to adore or not to adore. But to adore is nothing else than to know. Even the thought of France herself yields before universal certainty.

Let us evoke, upon these smiling summits and in this purified air, the vision of the High-Priest Antistius. A bitter mockery! We are far removed now from the pride that seemed so natural in solitude, and from the words that came so easily to our lips! In vain does the rebel try to measure the effects of disobedience, and in vain are rites and customs invoked. If the temple which created the union of the peoples of Latium be a lie, its work will not endure. For falsehood can found nothing, and the works of falsehood carry with them their own condemnation. But it is a miserable thing indeed to wrangle over the question whether such or such an illusion be necessary!

Maxence turns back. The immensity of the tropical night opens out before him, solemn and absolutely silent. Every outline has disappeared, all futile human words have died away. There is nothing now that can torment the belated pilgrim

except the longing for that knowledge which alone is essential. The most beautiful of poems will not satisfy the yearnings of this soul. No music will lull to sleep this sick man, who is suffering from the treachery and misery of the world. He needs the bread of substantial reality to dissipate the mirages that are killing him—no gentle dream of the heart, but the austere flight of the intellect, concentrated on the possession of things eternal. And, in his violence, he vomits from him the consolations offered by the dim, religious hours of evening; for there is no consolation for him except in the clear light of noon and the glittering brilliance of certitude. He curses peace of heart, because there is no peace but that of intellect. And all illusion is of the devil, but all reality is of God. . . .

Thirsting for light, this man plunges into the darkness. The silence of the sleeping streets is succeeded by the rattling

of the leaves at the very tops of the tall palm-trees, and where just now the clamour of men was at its loudest, fainter and more mysterious is the whisper of the night. Soon, behind the thick curtain of shadow, the sandy plain appears, reflecting back the whiteness of the starry plain above. Before an hour so sweet, so winning, Maxence is helpless. To take another step, even to move a limb, would be impossible. Suddenly, the interior spring breaks, and, vanquished by sleep, the soldier who looms so huge upon his own horizon rolls over on the ground, and one last, deep-drawn sigh drives forth his restless spirit for a time.

The first ray of sunshine, sweeping the plain and clearing away the dreams of night, raises with gentle touch his heavy eyelids. He springs up, a new man, and, as his eyes take possession of the world, and he finds himself once again on terms of close friendship with created things, all

that was of yesterday is ended, and once again the thick black line of night has been ruled across the foot of a concluded page. . . .

Some women had just entered the palm-grove, and Maxence said to himself that doubtless they were the same who, in 1909, had climbed the mountain of Amatil to urge on their men in the combat. They drew near, greeting submissively the master of an hour. Maxence looked at them with curiosity, somewhat sickened by the atrocious scent of musk, and suddenly the whole East rose before his mental vision. An untamed languor added to the beauty of these vivid faces, and the intricate way, too, in which their hair was dressed recalled the East — long black tresses laden with lumps of amber, trinkets of mother-of-pearl, and chrysolite ornaments ; and, as they toyed with his white silk haïk, he thought : “ How plainly one sees they are the wives and sweethearts of

warriors, accustomed to welcome those who have been absent in the desert, and who come back to the town wearied out, covered with dust, and with burning foreheads." Brusquely, but without a shade of feverish desire, he dismissed the others, ordering the youngest to stay with him. Apparently, he was simply conforming to the custom prevalent among conquerors. No passion consumed his heart. She, almost a child, awaited with resignation the caprices of the commander, drawing her big blue veil down over her face with a charming gesture. Then Maxence, standing before that motionless figure, that thing which belonged to him, was seized with an intense compassion. For a moment, he thought of sending her away, filled with shame at sight of this pitiful booty. But already his soul was no longer his own. The young Frenchman rose, and, shivering in the pleasant heat of morning, he bore off his prey through the

blue shadows of the palm-trees and the stir and rustle of the victorious day.

A gloomy delirium held him in its grip. For three days he was the slave of this slave. He had delayed his departure from Atar, and this delay might have the most grievous consequences for his troops. But this was a small matter compared to the degradation of a soul that had surrendered unconditionally to the devil. At last this proud man revolted. He gave his benumbed limbs a shake, opened his eyes, and, once more conscious of the world around him, rushed without a moment's hesitation back to his waiting men.

As he re-entered his tent, he suddenly thought of his friend, Pierre-Marie, and of that picture of the Virgin in tears which he had received, and which the wind had carried so far from him. He experienced a sharp pang such as he had never felt before. His heart, which had always

suffered from remorse, was learning a new kind of pain—mysterious and indescribable, as though earth and Heaven had combined to utter one great sob. In the past, Maxence had often wept over himself. But to-day, he could not turn his eyes from the Lady at so great a distance from him, who was weeping over the sins of the world.

All the wretchedness of his life was gathered up in this unhappy episode of Atar: first, his ardent longing for Truth, the impotence of his intellect; and then, his infamous weakness when confronted by pleasure, and all the disorder of a heart which, subject only to itself, is powerless to heal its own depravity. When he had heard those confident voices in the mosque of Atar, he had been thrilled with a passionate love for the Absolute. But now, after a searching glance at his own heart, he thinks of Purity—seeing on all sides an abyss, and the total absence of

God. "No," he said. "I can detect within myself nothing great, nothing beautiful. On the contrary, I have found out that I am like those mediocre men whose minds cannot conceive a vigorous thought, and whose hearts are incapable of strong emotion. Yes, I am like the great multitude of the impure and the wicked, the innumerable herds of the reprobate, save that I do indeed know myself, and cry for mercy with penitent lips." And, reducing all his longings to one common supplication, he exclaimed:

"O God of Heaven, if really You exist, look at the state of misery in which my conscience keeps me! Look at the extreme disorder of my whole being! On the one hand, I have an intense longing for a rule of life that will preserve me from sin, and, on the other hand, it is my steadfast determination that this rule must be in accordance with Truth, higher than, and independent of, the needs of men.

See my heart, Lord, that longs for Your peace, and my mind that will have nothing to do with peace if it is a lie and a delusion. O Heavenly Father, You understand!—it is not a shadow that I need, it is not a lie that will console me, in this great earthly battle in which I am engaged. For I am a real man in the real world, and I am a soldier fighting in the true battles of the world, and not a visionary or a dreamer. Give me, then, Lord, a mind ruthless in searching the Law and the testimony, like Your holy Prophet, and that will confound, if necessary, the lies of the wicked and the ungodly!"

Wonderful simplicity! Ingenuousness, honest indeed, but dull! It will be better understood if we remember that Maxence is before all else a soldier; that is to say, a man of reality, a man of cold logic—in a word, the opposite type to a romantic. Shall we say that his soul is narrow and destitute, and that his mathematics will

kill all freedom and originality of mind? But this would amount to believing that a life is rich in proportion to its range, whereas we know that it is rich in proportion to its depth. If he can only find the two or three principles for which he is seeking, Maxence will be richer than the dilettante who gathers all the flowers and enjoys none thoroughly. Moreover, unless he at least wished to be true, what would he do in this station of Atar, this rectangular fort, constructed by soldiers, and protected by its double wall?

At the entrance, Maxence is greeted for the last time by the prompt salute of the sentry. Quickly, the officer crosses the wide road which encircles the fort, and which is encumbered with military supplies. Having passed the second gate, he finds himself in a square courtyard, surrounded on all sides by buildings of severe simplicity, two of which, exactly facing each

other, have only one storey. Two outside staircases lead to the terrace, which is flanked by bastions, and surrounded by a parapet with embrasures. Two large verandahs cast a deep warm shadow, and there Maxence finds his comrades to wish them good-bye.

Between the two verandahs, the sunshine streams down upon a covered platform of the kind called *argamasse*. From this point, it is possible with a comprehensive glance to take in the whole character of the construction. Everything—the square arrangement, the uniform nature of the material (for walls and roofs are made of the same substance), the symmetrical plan—everything denotes order, proportion combined with strength, and harmonious regularity. The architect, the foreman, the masons—all were soldiers. Yet these amateur builders succeeded in erecting a structure fraught with a peculiar meaning. For the abode they constructed

for themselves is in some sort the abode of the Absolute. Maxence, confronted by these stones, laid so artlessly one upon the other, was filled with something that resembled enthusiasm. Here, on this bastioned terrace, he realised that he had found his starting-point.

"We touch here," said he, "the extreme northern boundary of our empire: beyond is pure space, unoccupied and waste. But how shall the ever-advancing sweep of our advance be stayed? The force behind us is invincible, because it is an organised force, similar to these forts which we inhabit, and which express, without any set intention on the part of their builders, the full import of our action. What can withstand force united to reason? It is a great disciplined wave that is rolling from one end of the Sahara to the other, and not a mere brute mass animated by no mind. What human power, then, can arrest the advance of

those who are winning a world for France?"

The northern verandah is almost level with the swaying branches of the palms. At the foot of their slender trunks horses are neighing. From time to time, men and children pass. And, beyond the dancing shadows, once more the eye rests upon the monotonous expanse of desert—space without boundaries. On the southern side, however, so dazzling is the brilliance that involuntarily the eyes must close: the plain rolls up to the very foot of the wall. Every now and then, a white column of dust rises in its centre, curling upward in spirals, drawn by the emptiness of the space above. In the background of the picture loom the high ridges of the solitary Adrar, far, very far from impure Maxence. . . .

What a noble air has the little *oppidum* of Atar, set in the midst of such a landscape! As the eyes of the receding

traveller rest upon it for the last time, it suggests the die tossed upon the table, on which is staked the destiny of France. One more undulation of the ground, and even as he turns to salute the symbol for the last time, it vanishes, and with it the last witness to Latin dignity.

"Having pitched his camp near that side of the *oppidum* which, lying beyond the river and the marshes, offered a narrow passage, Cæsar determined to get together the materials for a rampart—*aggerem apparare*—so as to push forward his engines of war—*vineas agere*—and finally to erect two towers—*turres duas constituere*. . . . As regards the supply of corn—*de re frumentaria*—he did not cease urgently to press the Boii and the Ædui. . . . But his army continued to suffer from the very great difficulty of getting corn, caused by the poverty of the Boii, the remissness of the Ædui, and the burning of the stores.

It reached such a point that the soldiers were often without corn, and suffered greatly from hunger. Yet, for all this, no words were uttered by them which were unworthy of the greatness of the Roman people and the superiority of the conquerors; *nulla tamen vox ab iis audita POPULI ROMANI MAJESTATE et superioribus victoriis indigna. . . .*"

Re-reading in his tent the simple and exact phrases of the conqueror, Maxence was better able to grasp in its entirety the scheme of the undertaking in which he was engaged. Yes, he was indeed familiar with the square walls, noble outlines, and straight, clear-cut lines of the *oppida* and Roman roads. Well, too, did he know the difficulties of the food supply, and the many anxieties concerning the *res frumentaria* and disputes with the neighbouring tribes. But that which more distinctly than all else he recognised,

was it not the *populi Romani majestas*, that serene, unswerving sovereignty, that majestic, sovereign dignity of France?

And yet he did not possess the tranquil confidence of the conqueror. For a long time now, more especially since his long sojourn at Atar, he had not been entirely at one with his own race. He felt that he did not share their life. He was convinced that he was not the rightful heir of that French dignity which he knew to be more particularly a Christian dignity. A stranger among the renegades and blasphemers, a stranger too among the faithful and the pacific, in no wise could he speak for that France whose name he was bearing to the uttermost parts of the earth. Happy are those who are not called upon to be the envoys of a whole nation! Happy are those upon whose shoulders is not laid the burden of a country! But as for him, he will have no rest until he has seen once more

the face of his native land, and learnt the true signification of her sacred name.

For, since the invasion of the Cæsars, twenty centuries of Redemption have elapsed, and, no matter how evil our will, we are still the heirs of God and the co-heirs of Christ. Even Maxence himself, who has never at the hour of sunrise seen his God descend for him upon the Altar—even Maxence has not started out with empty hands, but has brought with him the Cross of his Saviour whom he does not see. It is a weight impossible to measure, a burden that may not be laid down, since only the mysterious oppression of the heart and its very silence tell of its presence.

Thus, on African soil, our traveller, whatever he may do or wish, is always Christopher with his long staff, carrying on his shoulders, close to his bowed head, the Child who in His hands holds the globe of the world, while around Him shines the aureole of the light invisible.

## V

*A Finibus Terræ ad te Clamavi*

Camp-life—The practice of contemplation—The return to complexity—Towards the sea—There is now no way to avoid the combat—Conditions of the struggle—In praise of poverty—The weapon of silence.

THIS, more or less, is how the camp of the dromedary corps would have looked to a stranger: a medley of little straw-built shelters, low tents of striped canvas, patched and mended, teeming with life; the commander's tent neither higher nor more luxurious than those of the soldiers; here, a woman in blue, nursing a naked baby, there, small children playing on the mats of palm-fibre; men of every race, hailing from the four corners of Africa; the same stir and movement found

on the outskirts of a big town; all the inhabited space squeezed on to the top of a little sandhill that only just shows above the vast sea of dunes like a low-built barque riding upon the ripples of the shining water.

This is Zoug. And there, on the distant horizon, are all the points that give the azimuth and the latitude: to the south, the granite domes of Ben Ameïra and of Aïcha; to the south-west, the peak of Adekmar, and the Gelb Azfar; to the north, Kneïfissah, like a rat on a white wooden table; to the west, the chain of Zoug, as thin and clear as a Chinese painting in sepia. That is all. Except for these witnesses, ready to give evidence as to the exact position of the spot, there is nothing to attract or please. No forms, no colours. Light without colour. One Personage alone counts, and that is the Sky. Immense, of a beautiful deep azure substance, it occupies all avail-

able space, and seems to be the most certain of created things. From time to time, a ragged cloud drifts right across it—but quite in vain, since no rain will fall the whole year through. The earth is visibly of no account except as a prop for this sky, and by the very fact of her thus accepting the part of a slave, she too points the way to fulness of heart and silent contemplation.

But while he is taking his siesta, man must needs protect himself from the sky by a strip of canvas. It is, then, under a light shade, that Maxence awaits in the great noonday hush the re-awakening of life. Now and again, he gives a start: he has heard the sudden wailing of a child, and the voice of its mother quieting it. But the noise has waked several others: two tirailleurs exchange a few hoarse words. Two cries are heard: “Ali! . . . Ali! . . .” Then all is silent once more, the heavy head falls forward

on the breast, the eyelids close in order that Maxence may be able to think more deeply.

There is no cloud, no obstacle of any kind to prevent the gaze from following the course of the sun. Man has been set down face to face with light; there is no shadow on the earth except his own, and that of his uncertain dwelling. By the time the sun's rays have become oblique, and shine into the eyes and hurt them, it is possible to go out once more, and Maxence threads his way through the camels ruminating in the still heat. From time to time, they stretch out their long necks towards the little metallic stalks of the *hâd*, the only plant in this desert; or, better still, they enjoy doing nothing, their long lashes drooping over their peaceful eyes. The camel-keeper, his hair falling in long ringlets on his shoulders, hastens up to the master.

Maxence retraces his steps slowly, for

no purpose is served by walking fast. Some Moors are already squatting in a circle at the opening of the tent. He re-enters it and, throwing a keen glance at them, seats himself upon the mat. Then he listens to what they have to say, and answers them cautiously according to justice and reason, rendering to each what is his due, and saying what it behoves him to say. . . . Another evening has fallen. Another night is here, so pure, so primeval in its beauty, that instinctively every voice is lowered, then dies down altogether, till the whole earth is silent and attentive. . . .

Everything is simple and in its right place. The deep current of life has gushed up once more from the primitive shoot. All the dead branches, all the withered leaves have fallen, and now the hidden sap has only to rise, and the plant to blossom forth mysteriously. Rejoice, O exile, in the happiness of being true!

For you, the Western world exists no longer. Its lies, its futile conversation, its sophisms, are for you as though they had never been. You are here alone in the dreamy sweetness of the night, and to-morrow, when the frugal morning dawns, you will be a man grappling with the earth, a primitive man on this primitive planet, a free man in free space. For you are delivered from all that the hands of men have raised up in opposition to God, and, as far as the distant horizon, your eyes rest upon nothing but the very handiwork of the Creator.

Everything is simple and visible. And yet it is not a return to simplicity that Maxence has in his mind. The soul, thrown upon her own resources, discovers treasures whose existence she did not before suspect, and the problems that present themselves deal with what is elemental, with Substantial Truth as a term of the equation. The man receives

no support from Art or Nature, and therefore he discerns more clearly his own complex composition. The mind will not cease from questioning, and every unsatisfied longing, silenced while the body was in a state of slavery, starts up once again in the obscure depths of his conscience. Thus Maxence ponders over the field of the spiritual combat within him, and over the defection of all visible things. He is alone, at the point in the mariner's chart where all the winds of the world meet; but if he is alone, he is still in his own company, still in presence of his own familiar wretchedness, still confronted at every step by the "Why" and the "How." Everything here proclaims that a certain simplicity of body is in inverse ratio to simplicity of mind, and the rougher and harder a man's life, the subtler the intellect and the higher its flight, straining upward towards difficult things, towards that very thing which used to seem simple in the

bondage of the West. Whence it follows that the important thing in the civilised world is to live.

But here, the important thing is to think. And the young man who, in his own country, has never heard of any world except a world without God, will, if he stays at home, continue to follow the easy path along which he has been invited to walk; whereas, in the African Thebaïd, having once more found himself, he will again begin to question everything, and will insist on due authority and verification.

Maxence, notwithstanding the ever-changing aspects of a nomad life, could not turn his thoughts from that one point on which he felt his destiny depended. Towards the end of April, leaving the camp under the command of a sergeant, he set off with a small detachment of the dromedary corps in a westerly direction. He wished to make a straight line for

the little station of Port-Etienne, on the shores of the Atlantic, some two hundred miles from Zoug. The long hours on a camel's back, the monotonous panorama of untrodden space, the halts amid the infinite silence of men and things, the solitary watches beneath the stars, or else the long patient marches through the night—everything tended to make Maxence renew that passionate struggle, that hand-to-hand fight with himself waged under the blue heaven of the spiritual world within him.

If, by chance, it comes about that the law of silence is broken, it is in order that a word of deeper significance may issue from the troubled soul which yet is the abode of God. One morning, the day after they had crossed the desert of Tiris, Maxence and his comrades woke up at the well of Bou Gouffa. Unforgettable moment! They found themselves in the centre of a heath, where clusters of plants

sprang up in profusion, whose pale green foliage recalled the heather of Wales. An abundant dew covered the ground, for already the softening influence of the sea was making itself felt. Towards the east, the dark and jagged peaks of the Adrar Souttouf were visible, capped by a light mist.

The air was lighter, distilled in the secret laboratories of the Morning, and bearing on its warm breezes the fragrance of moist earth. A few drops of rain fell in the silence. Maxence, his face towards the east, was hailing the birth of the world, when Sidia, a Moor of his escort, approached him, and, with a wide gesture of his right arm towards the horizon :

“God is great!” he said.

His voice trembled a little. . . . No other words were spoken that morning.

Once more they started off. Another desert then opened out before them, that of Aguerguer—a vast expanse of white

pebbles and white sand, dotted with domes of glittering sand. Now and then they halted for a brief space, because for a few feet some parched *usid* had succeeded in obtaining a foothold, despite the constant movement of the sands, and the dromedaries were able to graze. . . . "O land of light!" said Maxence, "land made for the sun, solitudes only troubled at wide intervals by the passing of some *medjbour*, or the pitching of a transitory camp—what are we doing here amid your wastes? We look behind us and about, we take note of our own presence, and almost we ask pardon for being here. . . ."

However, the nearer these men came to the ocean, the more did they feel within them a certain gay exultation. It was not rare for them to sing, and as for Maxence, he urged on his fine horse more and more eagerly, stroking its flanks caressingly with his knotted stick. Soon the landscape began to suggest those areas of

demolition so frequent on the outskirts of towns, waste land, covered with white plaster, and hacked with ditches and excavations. At the foot of the calcareous upheavals, gazelles were coursing over the sandy plains, as they ran, turning their heads in the direction of the astonished travellers. . .

Then, one evening, Maxence found himself on the edge of a great hollow which looked like a dried-up lake. The guide stopped short in surprise, and then retraced his steps. Maxence felt as cold as during a night at sea, chilled to the bone, and uncomfortable as on a frigid voyage. He took his bearings, and pointed once more into the night, and they went forward again with a last shrinking effort. But their progress was uncertain. They were obliged to halt, and wait for the coming day to settle their route.

On the morrow, soon after the start, the

guide caught sight of a dark line on the horizon of the lake they had come upon the night before. It was the sea! Maxence put his horse to the trot, thoroughly roused by the salt odour already rising from the distant bay. An hour afterwards, the vague outlines of an immense strand came into view. Beyond it lay the sparkling sea, which seemed as though it were stretching itself out into all kinds of extraordinary and inconceivable shapes. The ill-defined line of the shore put the finishing touch of confusion to the whole scene.

At length, these men from the ends of the world arrived at that precise point where the last dying wave of the sheet of liquid comes in contact with the mineral element of earth. Then, having halted, they set foot in the water, in order to test the reality of this intensely living thing that lay before them. In contrast with the enervating melancholy of the lagoon,

the clearly outlined bay afforded them keen pleasure, and the graceful curve of the shore filled every heart with happy peace. Maxence said nothing, conscious only of the completeness of his liberation from the shackles of the past. He was like a man who, after long weeping and the shipwreck of all his hopes amid the flood of tears, suddenly experiences a feeling of relief.

Search as he will, he can discover nothing within him except a feeling of security and untroubled bliss. The desert is behind him, but he has turned away his eyes from it, as though he never more would need to dwell there, and, in delight at this beautiful new scene, he yields to the influence of the re-found Atlantic. Its waters fill his cup exactly to the brim with deepest satisfaction. Where, indeed, is the suffering soul that the ocean waves do not deliver from its pain, that is not lifted up and borne forward by the rhythmic

breathing of the sea? Maxence, his feet on solid earth, fixes his candid gaze upon the bay. Now, he catches sight of a porpoise leaping above the foam; now, his eye follows the flight of the huge cormorants, darting down from the sky above on to the sharp crests of the billows. . . .

Short respite! Brief holiday from those heavy hours when this man who is lost in the deep places of the earth is the prisoner of his own restricted horizon! Once again a Moor—the same Sidia—was to bring Maxence back to the business that occupied his soul. Like a match on a hay-rick on a summer's day, so did his words fall on the young officer.

At Port-Etienne, Maxence used to like to leave the station, and go with some of his comrades to the narrow beach which dips towards the south, wedged in between two sheets of azure. Near at hand, fishing-smacks were rocking lazily upon the water, and farther out still, lay a great

keel, half covered by the waves. He liked to watch the Spanish fishermen from the Canaries, as they hauled their heavy nets laden with fish over the sands. He felt as though he were in a dream, resting under a sky studded with suns. Only the guttural shouts of the fishermen broke rhythmically into the silence: "*A la! A la! A la riva!*" But he himself was silent, thinking of nothing, only conscious of one persistent sensation — the even, monotonous swaying of the camel as, one after the other, its four hoofs struck the ground with measured precision.

That day, as he was returning, Maxence gazed with admiration at the four great pylons of the wireless telegraphy station, rising above the dry rubbish of the peninsula. As a Frenchman, he considered himself the proud possessor of this soil, and, over and beyond that, being able by means of these metallic masts to collect the news from every quarter of the globe,

he was able to take the measure of the whole earth. Accordingly, intoxicated by the thought of such incomparable sovereignty : "Come!" said he to the Moors. They looked through the glass into a small room filled with sparks, and saw an ordered confusion of quivering copper wires. In a neighbouring shed, the thud of a motor could be heard, and its dull humming mingled with the formidable detonations of the sparks.

"See," said Maxence to the soldiers, "how foolish are those Moors who would resist the French. Is there in all the world a power to be compared to ours?"

Then it was that a voice, gently and as from a far distance, uttered the decision :

"Yes, you Frenchmen possess the kingdom of the earth, but we—we Moors, possess the Kingdom of Heaven."

Maxence looked at Sidia, a sharp pain stabbed him, and he stifled an exclama-

tion. But what was the use of replying, and what could he reply? Suddenly, all within him was dark and sad. . . .

O Maxence! you will never forget these words, and always that haughty glance will seem to rest upon you, as you stand silent and with downcast eyes. In vain will you stammer out: "It is not true." Wherever you may go henceforth in the land of the living, a voice will say within you: "Yes, the kingdom of the earth is yours. All human knowledge is yours. All human thought lies in the hollow of your hand, and there is no system that you have not weighed, no city that you have not visited. All that can be measured in Nature has been measured by you. All that can be brought under the power of man you have made yours, and you have marked it with the badge of servitude. But the Heavenly Kingdom which cannot be weighed or measured—that Kingdom does not belong to you.

The City of God which is not built of stones, but of the merits of all the Saints, that Jerusalem which is above, is closed to you. You are limited to a human ratio, and as man is to man, you know all. But as man is to God—the visible order to the invisible—the natural to the supernatural — the visible accident to the invisible substance—you have scarcely so much as stated the mysterious equation, and set the known term beside the unknown."

O Maxence, you will never forget these words! In vain will you say: "It is not true, for on every side men rise up on Christian soil to bear witness on my behalf, and I recognise them as well-loved brothers of my blood. Look, Sidia! here, for your confusion, are the ascetics laden with good works; here are the contemplatives, in whom nothing human remains, and already their faces glow like the bodies of the glorified; here are the expounders of mysteries, those who have

passed beyond the effect and grasped the cause, and none may follow them into the secret recesses of their thoughts but such as already possess the grace of the Spirit ; here are those blessed ones of God through whom miracles of love have been accomplished ; here are the Saints, beneath whose feet marvels blossom forth like flowers ; and the Doctors, into whose very joints and marrow the Word has penetrated ; and here is the divine madness of the Martyrs. Here, too, in our remote villages, are the humblest of my brothers, the most obscure, the most bowed down with toil. But even they possess Heaven, and no matter how their steps may cling to earth, yet they live in the spirit, and participate in that which is divine. And it is they, O Moors, they above all others who will confound you, and avenge your insult. . . .”

In vain will these words be said. For the very witnesses whom Maxence has

invoked turn against him, and condemn him, and, even more than Sidia, they cover him with confusion. They rise up as his accusers, and stand before him, lively reproach written on their sorrowful faces.

Maxence left Port-Etienne with the conviction that he was a very poor man—but, rich in this certainty, he once again plunged into the desert with the same gloomy excitement as a gold-seeker plunging into the deepest forests of Guiana. Nothing that he knew amounted to the deep satisfaction of a spirit that has wholly found itself, and is consumed in the victorious flame. No master was for him a master whose authority was unquestionable. No word, of all the words that he had heard, was the word of life. And yet he felt confusedly that it would be here, in the silence of the eternal sands, that the Good Shepherd would appear, stretching out His bleeding hands to His new

sheep. One after another, in preparation for the final deliverance, the fiery Circles of the Inferno were opening to let him through, and already, far away across the parched and thirsty earth, he caught a glimpse of the Heaven of eternal refreshment.

The time of trials was not over, but the blessing of God rested upon them. Maxence suffered thirst, the bitter anticipation of death, a bloody sweat, and fatigue so great as to resemble a last agony—everything, indeed, save despair, from which a mysterious force preserved him. And sometimes the little troop was seized by a panic of fear, a hideous fear, flitting from place to place, with chattering teeth, like the North Wind on a moonless night. Then the taciturn leader had to conjure up a smile, and speak gently and reassuringly as a father to his children. And at such times, riding at the head of the serried human mass that followed him

so closely, he was like the little lamp of Hope gleaming out from the far end of a deserted shore.

By the time they reached the well of Bir Guendouze, provisions were almost exhausted ; Maxence, therefore, hastened to march on to Bou Gouffa. The heat had become intolerable. The air was so heavy that they had to push through it like swimmers struggling through stagnant water. The sky was obscured by a fine yellow dust, everywhere flecked with light. Some of the camels fell dead from exhaustion. The whole atmosphere suggested a great copper bell, that had lost the property of resonance, and was tumbling down on to a stupefied world. Maxence feared the loss of all his beasts and would have preferred to march by night. But the moon and the stars were hidden by mist, which made it impossible to calculate the direction.

On the third day, they had started

before dawn. When day broke, Maxence halted his troop for the morning prayer. The vast plain lay wrapped in silence, as though the world had ceased to breathe. Soon, the big smoky disc of the sun emerged from the mists of the horizon, already, early though it was in its course, covering with immense sheets of metallic light the radiant surface of the earth. Once more they started. Presently, the first heights of the Adrar Souttouf came into view, looking as though they were close to them, for, by a peculiar phenomenon, distance was obliterated, and the customary order and proportion of things produced by the atmosphere had vanished. At length, towards noon, Maxence dismounted at the well of Bou Gouffa, at the very spot where, a few days before, a Moor, and not he, had testified to the glory of God. The first *bolgia* had been passed.

Now, the thoughts of these men, so

silent and recollected, were not complex and diverse, but, on the contrary, all minds were stretched like strings about to break, towards the goal in space for which they were bound. The very same evening, they started to cross the Adrar Souttouf. Towards ten o'clock, Maxence found himself between two walls of stone which seemed to be the entrance into the solid rock. The camels were only able to advance with difficulty. Behind the débris of the passage, the mountains could be seen, and, every now and then, the burnous of the young commander was torn by the thorny branches of some tree clinging to the sides of the rocks. They were lost in the rocks of the Adrar Souttouf, where doubtless no human being had penetrated before them—lost among those wild solitudes that are only troubled at rare intervals by the passing of a solitary mountain sheep. The fascination of this thought made Maxence forget his

anxiety, and caused him to turn his eyes away from the vaulted roof that closed so obstinately over him. Presently, however, an opening appeared on their right—a steep but sandy slope. At the foot was a deep and narrow *oued*, closely hemmed in on all sides by precipitous rocks. There was enough sand there for them all to rest upon. So they halted, and Maxence, as he stood shivering under the invisible stars, looked about him at the second *bolgia*.

But the third *bolgia* was the Tiris, accompanied by hunger, extreme want, intense loneliness. Maxence was getting farther and farther away from the earth. His life now only pulsed feebly and slowly. And already nothing human remained in him, as he penetrated more and more deeply into the endless dream of supernatural light. From time to time, he would make an effort to regain possession of himself, and, his chin in his hands,

would say: "Come, where are we? Let us consider." But the hands fell back again, and the voice within him said: "Later. . . . But for the moment Silence is the master, and must be allowed to do his work."

And what indeed were his trials, and what all these valleys of pain, in comparison with the great blessing that he now possessed? . . . Woe to those who have never known Silence! Silence is a little corner of Heaven that comes floating down to men. It comes from a distance so great that the mind cannot grasp it, it comes from the vast interstellar spaces, from the still latitudes of the cold moon. It comes from behind Space, from beyond Time — from where worlds have never existed, from where worlds have ceased to exist. How beautiful is Silence! . . . Silence is a wide African plain over which a biting wind is blowing. It is the Indian Ocean by night, with the stars above it. . . .

Well did Maxence know them, these vast spaces that recall the shoreless streams of Paradise. And he knew, too, how it felt to be borne down the swift descent of the river of Time, when Silence first closes the lips, and then penetrates the very soul, finding its way to those inaccessible regions where God reposes within us. And when he issued forth from this hiding-place, like a hermit who leaves his hut to admire the work of the creation, already it was to say :

“Everything bears witness to You, O Heavenly Father. There is no hour that is not a proof of Your existence ; no hour, however dark, in which You are not present ; no trial which is not a proof of You. If I die of thirst in this desert, I will still bless this day—for I have seen You present in Your justice as I have seen You present in Your mercy, and my concern is not with appearances, such as thirst and hunger and weariness, but with

You, who are the Reality. O my God, help me to walk along the path in which You Yourself have set me, remembering the words of Your Son, who said: 'You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you.' "

## **SECOND PART**



# I

## “The Fields are white already to Harvest”

Maxence remembers that other centurion who saw the Saviour on the Cross and who believed—As for him, he has only the sky to look at, but it is the sky of Africa that gives new life to the soul—Maxence needs nothing now but grace—The combat in the night—The hero of these pages faces death—But with the return of day, words of thanksgiving again rise to his lips—Greatness and servitude of the Christian soul typified in the soldier.

SAND is the primitive element, that self-same matter which in the beginning was divided from the waters. It is difficult to believe that it is formed by the disintegration of the rocks; on the contrary, its wide sheets are scarcely distinguishable from the fluid substance of a nebula. It is movement—pure, original

movement—anterior to stability ; it is the imponderable, to which no life has been able to cling. How many times Maxence, looking at the melancholy expanse, was reminded of those vast pictures of Genesis, when Time itself had only just been created with the first day and the first night ! How many times he was carried back in spirit to those hours, the first hours, that ushered in this new phenomenon : the Present joined to the Past ! How many times he had turned giddy at the thought of our planet, with its burning centre, even although he knew he dominated it by reason of the lofty human intellect ! "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." If one tries to represent to oneself the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity hovering over the waters stirred by great and peaceful eddies, while innumerable armies of Angels have just been called into existence in the Heavens, one will have reached the

highest point to which the human imagination can attain, like a traveller gazing down upon pure space and upon the impenetrable form of the desert. . . . The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the sands.

But more often, especially in the pleasant hours of early morning, with the prospect of a long day's march before him, Maxence confines himself to what is human, and fixes his gaze upon that living circle described within the circle of the horizon, and which encircles him. He knows his men, and they know him. They are bound together by a common life that each communicates to each. He is their commander, and they are his men. And together, they all make up a small but complete system, subject to the law of moral gravitation, whirling through shoreless space, and lashed on every side by hurricanes of sand. Maxence commands and they obey. He is just like the

centurion, with his century behind him, saying to this man, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes.

Here, then, is Maxence, exactly similar to those humble officers of the Roman cohorts who appear from time to time in the pages of the Gospels to show us what it is that God prefers. It was at one of these that the Lord Jesus marvelled on the very day that He entered Capernaum, for He had not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. O gratitude, reaching down the ages! Sweet and moving salutation! One soldier has been given the first place in the Christian dispensation, and another stands at the foot of the Cross, and uncovers himself before the Face of the Man of Sorrows, and says: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" And there is yet another called Cornelius, who was centurion in a cohort of the legion named Italian, and he was the first among the Gentiles

to receive the Holy Spirit with the Word of Jesus Christ. And now there is Maxence, who is also a soldier among many soldiers, a soldier like these other soldiers, for the soldiers of every age are alike, and all have been admitted to the friendship of the Saviour—Maxence, an honest soldier, who demands nothing better than to know and to obey, and who awaits, with true submission, the orders of his General.

"O my God!" said this last comer, like the Lieutenant of Capernaum, his senior, "speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed!" But this word, this undeniable sign, this authentic answer to his prayer, he must have; and as the Commander-in-Chief collects all the supplies and munitions necessary for the expedition before setting forth, so Maxence was unwilling to undertake anything before the weapons of Truth were ready. "I know," he said again, "that there are

men who pretend to love what is true. But if a truth comes from God, they reject it, and veil their faces like hypocrites and Pharisees. They express themselves quite ready to weigh and examine everything, yet to that which transcends the visible, and which cannot be settled by human chatter, they will not attend. They admit the Truth, provided it can be fitted into the framework which they have prepared for it. If men like these were to go to Lourdes, and see the dying rise up from their stretchers, the lame walk straight, they would still say 'No,' in their infernal malice. And if they were to put their hand into the open Wound in the Saviour's side, they would still say with Thomas called Didymus: 'I will not believe.' Ah no! I am not like those accursed men. It is true that my heart is shut against You, O my God; it is slow and obstinate, tardy in welcoming You. But only show me the Wounds

in Your Hands and Your Feet, and I will say like Your Apostle : ‘My Lord and my God !’ I will not resist the Truth—resist it even though it comes from You ; and if You have said, ‘It is so,’ I will not say ‘It is not so,’ when it is.”

Such were the thoughts of Maxence towards the second year of his wanderings in the Sahara. He was conscious of increased aptitude in all that pertained to the inner life, and of the widening circle of spiritual possibilities. Rain fell while he was in the rocky plain of Tijirit, and that evening a sky of marvellous beauty greeted him when he issued from his tent. It was painted in unusual colours, but the prevailing tint of its liquid depths was a very pale translucent green. It reminded Maxence also of certain delicate roses that he had seen in China, or else of the deep transparent water in the bays of the

Breton coast. Towards the zenith, the picture shaded imperceptibly into pink ; while towards the horizon, a few stretches of light clouds floated near the freezing regions of the upper atmosphere. The sun had just disappeared, and divergent rays, like huge folds, streamed from the point where it had vanished. But these rays were not rays of light—they were only slanting trails of greenish pink, a little paler than the rest of the sky. At this moment, the plain looked to the traveller truly marvellous in extent. The long ridge of Tahament, towards which he had been marching for three days, was of a very pale grey, and yet its outline stood out sharply against the infinite depths of the western sky. There was nothing else in the whole plain to attract the eye except a thin silvery line—one of those ephemeral lakes that appear in the winter, only to vanish after a few days, sometimes for several years.

Great things can assuredly be accomplished under such a sky. Its silence and its depth impress Maxence, and drive him out of himself into that region which lies beyond the evidence of the senses and outside the narrow circle of egoism. And he says : "I feel that beyond the fading beams of the horizon, are all the souls of the Apostles, Virgins, Martyrs, and the innumerable army of Witnesses and Confessors. And all are urging me on with holy violence, and bearing me by force towards the Upper Heaven, and I long, I long with all my heart, for their purity, their humility, and their compassion ; I long for the chastity that girds them, and the piety which is their crown ; I long for their grace and their strength. But I will not stand still, I will continue to go forward towards the highest type of humanity, towards the great people yonder behind the most distant line of the horizon, who are being swept along

the track of Infinity by the breath of the Divine Spirit."

Thus his heart was reaching up towards perfection, towards that point, the end of all his investigations, the union of the beautiful with the true. The beautiful he could already perceive, and through it he was drawing near to a knowledge of God. Is not that man in some sort a Christian, who desires that a fresh fountain of life should spring up in his soul, who thirsts for supernatural virtue, who desires to live with the Angels and no longer with the beasts, who wills to raise himself up, to become more and more spiritual, and whose heart has grown so vast that it transcends the limits of the earth? Is he not worthy, in some degree, of being nourished by Catholic Truth, he who longs so painfully to be better, he whose wish is to conform himself to the Absolute, and who has the penetration to say: "The morality of man is good, but the

morality of God is better”? And does he not already belong to Heaven, he who so desires it, and who feels its mysterious attraction?

“But all this is little enough!” cries Maxence. “For I am here, where every miserable dispute has died away, and in a corner of the world beyond the reach of the bitter voices of the doctors of the Temple. I am here, feasting my eyes on the incomparable evening, while, over there, the men of lies are rejoicing over gloss and text, because of the subtlety of Satan that is within them. Here, no odious and quarrelsome words can reach me, no burst of laughter from one who has played another an ill turn and is closing the door gleefully behind him, no loud contentious words from the infamous judge who has killed God with the letter of the law. All these are dead—dead as the cry of the bird upon the seashore on a dark night, a cry that does not carry

beyond the tenth wave. All such noises are drowned in the silence. All this mortal noise has been reabsorbed into immortal silence. All these passing voices have died down before the silence of the Spirit. But what am I saying? While I am here alone and at this distance, on every side I see the one great Fact insistently asserting itself. The Evangelists have spoken, the testimony has been given, and the fourfold affirmation is so strong and so clear that in itself it suffices, and answers every objection. The Church of Peter perpetuates it, the very fulfilment of her promise being the pledge of her truth. And from time to time, formidable signs cause the world to tremble. The dead come to life again at the kiss of the Saints ; and in a piscina, more precious even than that of Bethesda, horrible ulcers are healed, and scales fall from blind eyes, to the confusion of false scientists. Yes, from every side, the Fact forces itself on

men's attention, and it bears the stamp of certainty and indubitable proof. The world is troubled to its very depths. The wicked tremble, and the men of truth bow their heads, for they have recognised the presence of God.

"But I—I have no need of these signs and of these wonders, for I am here, contemplating the world in which I find myself, and my soul in the midst of the world. This miracle is enough for me—that I am here, and that I know myself as unknowable. This miracle is enough for me—that I have a soul in the midst of this world, a soul so deep that I hang trembling above it, like the bird with outstretched wings poised motionless over the abyss. It has not been given to me to contemplate the earth shaken before the Face of the Lord ; I have not seen the rivers flow up towards their source, nor the mountains skip like rams. The order of nature has not been suspended

before my eyes. But I have watched this miracle—the miracle of the order of nature perpetuating itself. I have seen God leave everything in its place, according to the primitive ordinance. I have seen this marvellous world, with nothing lacking to its completeness. Everything is full to the brim, yet there is not a drop too much. The matter exactly fills the mould, and my soul—that is, the something I am conscious of within me that is not mortal—my soul is capable of grasping this world. I have contemplated the system of things invisible, visibly revealed, and the wonderful way in which matter is perfectly adjusted to mind."

What, then, was wanting to Maxence? What force was it that pulled him up on the threshold of the glad dwellings of the Absolute, and what was this mysterious pain mingled with rapturous exultation at the conquest of the world? It was just this: his voice was alone in the desert.

The God he called upon had not yet come. Nothing within him, he felt, was of Heaven. In the spiritual dialogue held in this forsaken corner of the world between a soul and its Creator, the principal Voice had not yet spoken. The words of deliverance had not so far been pronounced, and Maxence felt that he should advance no further, unless the Master came to him and said : "Arise and walk!"

Let us, however, consider this man more closely, placed in the midst of the desert with his human task, and the mission he has to accomplish on the earth. Wherever he may go, it is his duty to impose the rule of France. Every day of his life, he pledges the French name. He may not falter. It is his duty to conquer, he is under an obligation to succeed. He is not a dreamer, he is a man of realities. He is the artisan who builds up French supremacy. And this is the task

that has been allotted to him : To live among men, for peace or for war, in such a way that the good may become his allies, and the bad may be punished. The whole course of his life tends to give him an exalted idea of human effort.

Maxence has been some days in the Tassarat when he learns from his native troops that the encampment of Sidina-ben-Aïllal, who had recently tendered his submission at Atar, is not far distant. Now this tribe has not yet paid the war levy imposed. The young Frenchman, therefore, hurries forward, and thirty Moors, chosen from among his best men, follow him. . . . They come upon the Chief's camp, twenty-three wretched tents, which the plain has not been able to hide. . . . Twenty-three tents! What matters that to Maxence? He has a whole nation behind him. While he takes from the flocks of the tribe the number of beasts that are due to France,

the old Sheik gazes at him with a dark and gloomy air, only with difficulty restraining his anger. Nevertheless, the transaction over, he regains possession of his equanimity, argues, entreats, and even goes so far as to assert that he desires to live on good terms with the conquerors. For a long time they talk together in the tent. Sidina seems more friendly. And as there is a lack of water in the region, they decide that both parties shall move on next day, the French towards the west, and Sidina towards the east. Night passes, and Maxence is about to break up the camp.

Alas for words! The Moors have already decamped, and there is no trace of them in the direction of the east. Sidina has gone towards the north. "We must be on our guard," thinks Maxence; "the old fellow is going to play us a nasty trick." Once more they start, advancing slowly, on account of the fatigue of the

camels. Towards evening, they halt at the well of Bir Igni. No sign of man! The whole earth looks absolutely forsaken. "My friends," says Maxence, "I believe that we shall be attacked during the night. Hold yourselves in readiness, and, above all, let no man fire without my orders. *A tout à l'heure!*"

A cold wind has risen. Maxence walks up and down, thinking of the sounds of Europe, of the voices of the village bells, of the song of a passing beggar, of the echoes from some hidden forge.

And suddenly he stands still, for, stealing from out the cold shade yonder, comes all the soft, sweet music of his country. The next minute he exclaims abruptly: "How I wish that I could kill that dog!" He calculates the direction from which the attack will come. But these night combats are treacherous things—he does not like them. Once more he begins his monotonous, interminable pacing to and

fro. As the critical hour draws nearer, he is better able to realise the solemn presence of death, and, face to face with it, he examines himself with deep seriousness :

"Is it, then, nothing to die?" says he. "Is it, then, nothing, that the state of this something in me which is not my perishable body should be fixed for all Eternity in the very instant that life ceases? I do not know, but one would wish at such an hour that one's soul were pure and spotless. One would wish to get rid of every trace of human misery—wish, too, that the ugliness of sin might be effaced. Here, in front of me, lies the Field of Death, and it is beautiful as the Promised Land. Here is the Angel holding the Book, and underneath his wing the night is luminous, and we stand in the reflected light of Eternity. Is it then nothing, O my God! this hour which is unique among all hours, and which is like no other, because no

other hour will follow it? Oh, how one would like to be clean when one is about to be delivered for ever from the things of earth! But I stand before you, O Death, such as I am, and unable to change one iota of what has been. I stand before you, with all my life, just as I have lived it, having done much evil and little good. For all the evil I have done, I am sincerely contrite, and as to the little good, I make no boast of it, but simply ask that it may not die, but may bear the fruits of Eternity." And, having found these words in his heart, he follows the train of thought that they suggest, and forgets the human adventure in which he is engaged. Then, all at once, there is a violent commotion, a sudden rending of the night, and Maxence rushes to his men.

A short interval of silent suspense follows, and then on every side, among the shadows, the crackling of shots is heard. Although invisible in the dark-

ness, the sinuous line of the enemy is clearly indicated by the sound of the firing all round them. “Confusion might be our undoing, nothing else,” reasons Maxence in a flash; “but if only these *enfants terribles* of mine will keep cool, I am sure of the issue.” For his little company is drawn up on the flat summit of a slight eminence, and a mass of boulders forms a natural defence. Meanwhile, the enemy grow uneasy at obtaining no reply from the darkness before them. They keep up a dropping fire, then, suddenly, the shots come in quick succession. Maxence has the impression that ghosts of men are moving towards him in the dense thickness of the night. “Ah! here they are!” he says. “Only two cartridges. . . . Fire!”

A tremendous detonation shakes the hill on which they stand. Maxence is surrounded by a ring of fire, and a singular absence of sound follows the sharp rattle

of the musquetry. "Will the dawn never come?" thinks the commander, his eyes searching the abyss. Suddenly, an uproar, a terrible scrimmage, cries of rage! . . . The enemy has slipped through a gap in the boulders, and by this means has entered the camp. Maxence, beside himself with anger, dashes forward with drawn sabre. He thrusts home, and has the sensation that where his arm ends, some human fat has been pierced. In the desperate struggle, his men hold their heads down and strike hard, and on all sides blood flows freely. Day dawns at last and lights up the scene—the unconcerned, indifferent desert, and the little circle of exasperated human passion. The sun is shining where but a short time since all was sinister shadow, and its beams light up the field of carnage and the sinister folly of men. The Moors have fled. It is all over. They are, as it were, at the end of a dream, when man,

after the phantasms of the night, greets once again, in the gentle radiance of the dawn, the things that really exist.

Another evening is here. They have marched all day, and now they are on a white plain, flecked with light, and no one knows its name. The dunes are of a sand so light that no grass has been able to take root in it. The world is waiting for the night. The sun itself is silent. And deeper still, heavier still, is the silence of human weariness. Maxence watches on into the night : he is the man who is always up, who is always to be seen rising above the ground like a mighty column. And now he breaks out into an act of intense thanksgiving :

“I am glad, O Earth, to find myself once more in the midst of thee. How beautiful it is to be bathed in life, surrounded by life, like the boat upon a river that has overflowed its banks, and which strives against the current, and sings for joy !

How beautiful is the sky, viewed from the shores of earth! O mysterious grace of life, I bless thee! Deep spring of water, essential principle, I praise thee, I exalt thee, and again I praise thee! I exist, I inhale with a deep breath all the scents of earth, I have my place beneath the sun. O miracle! This great and solemn privilege is granted me—still to be a man."

To whom, then, is Maxence speaking —this utterly forsaken Maxence? He is speaking to his Father, to his God whom he does not know, yet never for a moment does he cease to be the combatant to whom a place in the struggle has been allotted. He is speaking to his Father, but he knows what his own arm can do. His place is not among the men of peace ; on the contrary, he has all the daring, all the virile valour of youth. He is one who will take Heaven by storm, who will lay violent hands upon Eternity. He is one to whom all is permitted. Has he

not faced death? Are not all the evenings of his life evenings of battle?

But he is speaking to his Father; he knows that he has a Master, and that this Master can do everything, and that he himself can do nothing. And how admirable is this seeming contradiction! The efforts of this soul will be in vain, if there be no submission; yet of what value is a submission that leaves no place for effort? Maxence begins to see that the highest achievement of the human conscience is completely to harmonise effort with submission, liberty with servitude, and that this harmony is only possible in Jesus Christ. Men may indeed desire to enlarge their moral life without God, as did the Stoics and the Huguenots. But then pride steps in, pride which spoils everything, and which is a lie. For well we know in our hearts that this voice rings false, and that the purple garment of the proud man is in reality the most horrible

destitution. In Jesus Christ, on the contrary, man desires to rise infinitely high, though all the while he knows himself to be infinitely low. And this indeed is true, since we walk in liberty as well as in servitude. "Misery calling itself greatness," says Pascal, "is the greatest of misery." And : "In spite of the sight of all the miseries that try us, that take us by the throat, we have an instinct that we cannot repress and that raises us." And, again : "Man's greatness consists in knowing that he is miserable." For our miseries never cease to trouble us, they are always present, we have only to open our eyes. Yet, at the same time, there is an instinct in us that warns us of our dignity and of the privileged place that we occupy in the world. For, even in the most hidden recesses of our bodily frame, there is nature, and there is grace.

Sweet and penetrating light! How glad he is, this anxious soldier, when he

perceives the beautiful balance and precision of Christian thought—that supreme standard by which everything has been weighed, that tranquil harmony in which everything within us has been considered according to true estimate and strict rule! Henceforth, everything within him is linked together, and likewise everything without him. He has staked out his part in the heritage of the Cross, and the very field in which he is now walking is his possession for eternity.

The centurion in the service of Cæsar, if he commands his men, yet obeys Cæsar. Certainly, he possesses the power to command, and to devise what is expedient at the right moment, and to him has been entrusted authority in the human sphere in which he has been placed. But, at the same time, he is the servant under the eyes of the master, and the slave in the state of the strictest dependency. Now, Maxence is precisely such a centurion,

and he knows both the power his words have over men, and also the extreme impotence arising from his state of servitude. When, however, he goes on to consider, not the centurion of Cæsar, but the centurion of Christ Jesus, he recognises, not a different man, but exactly the same one. For the Master has given him a strong will, and the pre-eminent gift of dominion over matter, and He has sent him forth to fight armed with the weapons of the intellect. Yet, at the same time, His hand has ever been above him, blessing all the labours of the earth. He has manifested Himself in His power, so that this man might learn to know his place, and He has made His gracious presence felt in the bitter struggles of life. But, out of all men He has chosen the soldier, in order that the greatness and the servitude of the soldier might be the figure upon earth of the greatness and the servitude of the Christian.

## II

### Beati Immaculati in Via

Maxence grows more impatient to know—But the secret of the things that are essential belongs to the pure in heart, and the only sure way to know the Truth is to become better—Deliverance from the past that hinders the free flight of Maxence—The house in order—Human liberty and Divine grace reconciled in Christianity.

SOMETIMES, towards the close of day, the bell of a distant village can be heard in the remotest valleys. Then, the labourer stands still, and, as he gazes before him into space, he feels a deadly chill grip his heart. For these are not the deliberate strokes of the Angelus, recalling the swing of a censer, and the bronze has lost the long-drawn vibrations that are wont to steal so peacefully over

the country landscape. On the contrary, the bell rings hurriedly, and at each stroke pulls itself up, arresting the brief sound it has hammered out on the motionless air. Fear is hovering above the world, evening draws a thicker veil about her, and still the dismal cadence sounds : it is the tocsin. And now every peasant searches the gloomy horizon for the glare that tells of a disaster. In some *bourg* a farm is burning ; somewhere, in the night, the flames leap up. . . . Come, then ! let us rise, and go towards this pain and death.

O Maxence, what is this inner summons that strikes you chill ? I have seen you shiver in the darkness. I have seen you during nights of bloody fighting, when Death brushed against you as he passed. I have seen you amid the ruins of your soul, when your heart had ceased to beat. O my brother, do not weep before the dark horizon that will not answer you !

The tocsin has sounded in the depths of your soul. Take your staff, and set forth to meet your pain. . . .

One o'clock in the morning. Maxence starts up, bathed in moonlight. But the soft radiance is not bright enough. The landscape is inscrutable, for they only arrived at nightfall, and the very disposition of the camp remains mysterious. Moreover, where are these men? Not one of them knows. Somewhere in Adrar, very far perhaps from Nijan, name that evokes so deep a longing. . . .

The commander has roused his men. Still half asleep, he stumbles along through the kneeling camels, and now and again one of them, disturbed in its interminable dream, utters a long, piteous, gurgling cry. How many such uncertain hours of night has not Maxence lived through in the past, hours when the heart is emptied of desire, and has no wish for anything beyond eternal rest! Then does a man

feel faint-hearted and over-burdened, then is he seized with treacherous longing for some sweetness in life. But no! the fire within this man is not dead, the cruel prick of fever has not ceased to torment him. Yet scarcely has the signal for the start been given, when a respite comes to him. Maxence draws a long breath, his whole being is pervaded by the airy stretches of sleeping space before him, and his spirit opens wide to the influence of the night.

They ride straight ahead over the roadless plains, the vanguard leading the way with the guides. Next comes the commander, solitary, recognisable by the tremendous height of his white dromedary. From time to time, with the customary click of the tongue, he puts the monster to the trot, as it goes gliding along over the carpet of yellow grass. One by one, the stars are rising on the eastern horizon, while, on the western shore of earth, the moon is enveloped

in mist. They ride straight ahead in the cold wind that had begun to shake and shiver just at the moment when absolute darkness fell upon the earth. It is the fatal hour when the moon has set, while the sun as yet delays its rising. . . . But here, at last, is the dawn, here is the victorious light, and in an instant the whole world is kindled with its rays. The travellers see around them patches covered with small grasses which the camels eat greedily. The goatskin bottles are full of water. They will halt here, then, and wait until the coolness of the night once more unbars the road.

The day, like a late fruit, will be long in ripening. Ah! how ill do these long hours of patient expectation accord with the eagerness of a soul which feels that it can wait no longer! Whether Maxence meditates in the warm shade of his tent, or bears his ennui with him into the world quivering with light, he is certain that all

his mental effort will be sterile, and already he is filled with bitter regret at the thought of these hours which he will not be able to employ. Look at him, O my God! He is being suffocated, he is dying, he is dashing himself in vain against the obstacle before him, as a wasp in summer flings itself desperately against the panes of its prison. He would wish—— . . . But no! There is nothing more to be done. He can think no longer, he can hope no longer, he is bathed in the sweat of the interminable agony. This is the end of the journey, and the failure, for ever, of this human spirit!

For ever? Perhaps not! But let Maxence hope for nothing from himself until the breath of Heaven shall have cleansed him from all the impurity of men. So long as his separation from the pure shall last, so long too shall last in him the agony of a spirit confined within a narrow space. He is standing on the threshold

of the kingdoms reserved for those whose hearts are pure, and who are beyond the reach of the ugliness of the world. O beautiful Kingdoms of the Intellect, into which none may enter but the transparent souls of the Saints!—beautiful regions, which those who are pure and wise in the eyes of the world will never know, but only those who are pure and wise in the sight of Heaven!—sublime gardens, whence even the good are driven out, and only the perfect are made welcome! Happy are the men who have caught a glimpse of you from this deep and distant valley where we wander weeping, and thrice happy those who have desired you in the days of their innocence and in the strength of their manhood!

Maxence knows it now—there is a hierarchy among souls. First, there are vile thoughts—for corrupt hearts. And then there are beautiful but facile thoughts, miserable and paltry spiritual pleasures,

for such hearts as are indeed profoundly ignorant of evil, yet that only practise ordinary virtues. But who are these whose glowing hearts outrun them, lighting their path like torches? They are the heroic souls, those who hunger after virtue, and are thirsty for justice. That they have been able to preserve themselves from great falls, seems to them but little. They aspire after that essential purity which is the gateway leading to higher knowledge. For everything is linked together in the interior life of man, and he whose heart is not as clear as crystal will never have a deep insight into what is true. And Maxence, where does he stand? Alas! how far he feels himself from Holy Wisdom! At what a distance from those heavenly guides who point the way to the only true knowledge! How arid and how desolate appears to him his path of exile and of pain.

It is three o'clock. The sun is still high

in the heavens, scorching with his rays the calcined surface of the earth. All that is liquid is consumed in the hot air of the furnace—the very saliva, the drops of human sweat, even the oil in the joints. No matter! They will start. Maxence can wait no longer. Important business calls him yonder. Up then, my friends! Follow this man who is tormented by a gnawing anxiety, and do not complain. If you knew what a cruel flame devoured his breast, you would pity him and not yourselves.

On and on they ride. Night passes. . . . Still they ride. . . . The sun springs forth once more from out the distant earth. . . . Some trees come into sight. A slight depression breaks the monotony of the desert. There are some very old ruins on the edge of a wood. Is it a dream, or is it one of those mirages that so often deceive wanderers through the sandy wastes? No, Maxence is simply at

Douerat, where his camels can fill their paunches and rest for several days in the kindly shade.

No sooner has the commander given the necessary directions as to the pitching of the camp, than he goes off by himself to sit among the ruins at the edge of the wood. There are sombre legends, well known to him, connected with this ancient town. But he has no wish to think of these. For the memory of another legend is stirring in the very depths of his heart—another story, too beautiful to be true. . . .

Over yonder, in this man's native land, there are houses of peace and of prayer, and in these houses, closed for ever to the noises of the world, men and women are living humble, silent lives. They come and go, engaged in various kinds of honest toil, and the calm expression in their eyes is the reflection of a stainless conscience. You have only to look at

them, to see at once that they are good labourers, who bend the whole day through over the human task assigned to them by God. Yet look more closely still: these people are Christians. You think they are on earth, but their conversation is in Heaven. You believe them to be among men, but they are in the company of their God. No matter how humble they may be, they are on terms of sweet intimacy with the Angels—and they are greater than the Angels, since day by day they can love with more intensity, and day by day can grow in Faith and Hope. Their souls are tranquil lakes, over which the Divine Persons love to bend. And on their foreheads is the Dove of the Spirit, because they have known how to keep themselves in innocence and peace. They no longer seek the exhilarating delight of travel, for the land where they have settled is too fragrant. Never again will they sail the stormy seas, for they have made

the port, and cast anchor in the haven of incomparable beatitude. O wonderful spectacle! Is it possible? Can it be told in mortal language?

Now turn and look at our traveller. See him, launched out upon the world, and upon sin. He is eager for new things. He wanders round and round the fields of earth, his glance furtive, a bitter taste in his mouth. He is trying to escape. He is trying to escape from his own soul, from the immortal and divine soul that is within him—to escape from his soul, that was created for Love, and is more beautiful than the Seventh Heaven. Nevertheless, in this terrible flight, he suddenly pauses, and considers the path he is pursuing and that will lead to his condemnation. He is afraid. . . .

"No," says a low voice within him. "It is not possible that life should lie that way—in the malice, the intense bitterness of an evil conscience. It is not possible

that the true road should be that which leads nowhere, and that the Saints should not prevail against us. . . .”

“Blessed,” continues the voice, “blessed are the undefiled in the way—in the way that is straight and not crooked, in the way that is shortest and most direct, not in that which winds in and out among appearances and leads back eternally to the same point.”

“Enough,” replies the traveller. “I am unhappy on this hostile earth, but for all that I do not desire your consolations. For my lot is cast with men, and not with Angels, and I have no wish for any company but that of those who live and breathe as I do.”

“That is not true,” retorts the voice. “You have no desire but for God, for knowledge of God is your portion, and as the bee in summer distils the honey, and as the flower secretes within itself its own peculiar perfume, so your function is to

contemplate the Imperishable with the eyes of love."

"Leave me alone—I am well enough as I am! The tears of men are beautiful, and their words satisfy my love."

"Tears, O traveller! . . But not all tears. The tears that are beautiful you do not know, because they are the tears of Hope. Look at that man yonder, as he kneels, sighing, at the feet of God. He too is anxious, but he is anxious to attain perfection ; he too groans, but it is because he is in exile. He too has his trouble to bear, but it is the trouble of realising how far his soul falls short of perfect beauty. Thus, his life resembles the continuous upward flow of the sap in bud after bud, and is a glorious ascent towards the highest Heaven."

"Yes, that man is the greatest of men, and the Stoic, for ever shut up in the prison of his own being, is miserable in comparison. But what shall I do to shake

off the deadly languor that oppresses me, and to raise myself above the plains of earth?"

And the voice says :

"Of yourself, you can do nothing. Your feet are fast in the soil. You cannot give yourself wings, and the finite earth all round you hems you in, within the circle of elementary knowledge. But He who has promised you life is drawing near, He is coming to loose the bonds of your captivity. Listen, unhappy man, to the words of deliverance. And then, restored to your native azure, fly, proud dove! fly to the Heart pierced by a lance, the Heart that bled for you. Watch and pray. . . ."

The traveller pauses. He is overcome by pain, regret, a vague, inexplicable feeling of nostalgia, of obscure remorse. And the same cry rises to his lips, untiring and monotonous, the same cry from his heart :

"O my God, since You have led me thus far on my way and given me a glimpse

of Your Face, do not forsake me now. Reveal Yourself to me, since You alone can do this, and since I am nothing. Just as You showed Thomas Your bleeding Wounds, give me too, O my God, a sign of Your presence . . .”

And the Master of Heaven and Earth replies :

“ You are seeking Me, and all the time I am here—in that very self-disgust you feel, in the sadness that weighs down your captive soul, even in the horrible nightmare of your sins. But how should you recognise Me, I who am true, in the midst of all the lies in which you still take pleasure? How should you understand My words, which are Peace itself, you who pass your life in sharp disputes, and in the discord and revolt of your body which, hissing with impotent anger, has risen up against your soul? Remember, My poor child, the town in which you used to dwell. Remember . . .”

Maxence hides his face in his hands. Once more he sees the leafy square near the gates of the city, and the globes of the electric light, and the Prince of this World, with his green and envious face, grimacing behind the lindens. And Maxence himself was there, chattering, endlessly chattering, like a tipsy man; and other people were chattering too, people who had covered up their utter filth with fine clean clothes, whose elegance was a sham, whose happiness was a sham, whose intelligence was a sham; men who considered themselves crafty clever fellows, but who would have been crushed by one strong word; gentlemen who were indeed very pleased with themselves, but who would instantly have crumpled up and vanished into air, had you ventured to utter before them one single little word of truth. And Pleasure was the Divinity of this quarter of the city, Pleasure, which demanded to be furiously pursued and gulped down

greedily to the point of satiety—as a duty.

“I love,” says God, “the house that is in order. I love everything to be in its place, and I shall not enter under this roof until everything has been prepared for My coming. A man, says My Son, made a great supper, and invited numerous guests. And at the hour of the supper he sent his servants to tell them to come, *because all things were ready*. Does anyone tell the guests to come before all things are ready?”

*Quia parata sunt omnia.* . . . Maxence, the tears in his eyes, catches a glimpse of the just man who walks before God in simplicity and truth. He has nothing to hide. There is not an hour of his life that is impure, because his Master has sought him out and delivered him from the weakness and despondency of sin. And so he slumbers peacefully under the protection of the Angels of Heaven; and should it

happen that he wake, he is still joyful, for immediately an act of thanksgiving rises to his lips, and the words of prayer are sweeter to him than honey. Day dawns, and he opens his eyes to behold created light, and, like all created things around him, he is full of confidence, for he knows that the blessing of the Creator rests upon him. All is joy, and peaceful, blessed harmony. He glorifies God in the glad moment of the world's awakening ; he glorifies Him for having given him a body to be the temple of his mind, and because he himself will rise again in the glory promised by the Saviour. He glorifies Him too for the gift of the intellect which ensures his dominion over organised matter. All is one within this man. Everything is in its place : his limbs, his flesh, his blood, all are subject to his mind, and his mind itself is subject to God, raising itself to Him with the greatest ease—for all that is visible belongs to the brute creation, but to

man it is given to pass beyond the circle of the apparent, and to pierce the azure of the finite sky above him.

Now, on the other hand, let us consider the blasphemer. He is like those reprobates whom Dante condemns to the torture of the pitch :—

*“Non far sopra la pegola soperchio . . .”*  
the demons cry to him in terrible accents.  
“Come not out above the pitch. . . . Stay in this heavy matter, this sluggish mud that will end by choking thee. . . . Stay in this substance which no longer merits even the bare name of life, but on the contrary has already all the horror of eternal death!” The unhappy man is frightened, he is a prey to insane dreams, he is surrounded on every side by horror and frenzy. It will be his fate to struggle despairingly in his slough. He will not know what to do to free himself; he will go on from lie to lie, ever more and more self-confident in the eyes of the world, yet

inwardly ever more cowardly and more afraid. And when the hour comes for him to give an account of himself to the Judge, he will writhe upon his pallet and cry desperately: "I am afraid . . . I am afraid. . . ." But it will be too late, and the sentence will be pronounced for all Eternity.

"It is My will," says God, "that your house should be in order, and that you should make the first step. I do not give Myself to the man who is impure; but to the man who does penance for his sins, I give Myself unreservedly, as My Son gave Himself unreservedly."

"Yours is a hard condition, Lord. Can You not first touch my eyes?"

"Can you not trust Me for a single day?"

"You can do all things, Lord!"

"You can do all, O Maxence. See, in your mortal hands you hold the scales, with the correct weight and the stamp of

infallibility. I have freed you from yoke and spur. I have made you greater than the worlds, since I have given you command over Paradise, which is greater than the worlds. Now, you thank Me for the light of the sun which I have given you. But you do not thank Me for this gift which is more precious than the sun and the whole panorama of nature. You are not grateful to Me for the high place of dignity in which I have set you. And yet there is nothing that I like better than to see you free, bearing yourself proudly in the face of Heaven. O Maxence, there are no bounds to your liberty except My love."

And the soldier, in the privacy of his own heart, listens in the desert to the Voice of the Lord. O abysses of contradiction! Mysterious Realms of Wisdom! The Son of God has shed His Blood for this Maxence. For him, He has been scourged and crowned with thorns. He

has borne upon His shoulders the heavy Cross of his sins. For him, His Heart has been pierced by the lance. One day, for this poor traveller, and for all the travellers of earth, He descended from the Seventh Heaven, He left the throne of light where He was reposing in the Bosom of the Father, He stretched towards this man His bleeding Hands, He became the Mediator, the Divine Link between Heaven and earth, the Pledge of the new and eternal Covenant.

Yet, for all that, Heaven is closed to Maxence. He is not in possession of the Kingdom of Grace which is his heritage, and, as far as he is concerned, the Sacrifice on Calvary has been accomplished in vain. What, then? This Jesus, who made the worlds, and the earth with its plains and streams and forests, who made the light and the changing seasons, has come among us, certainly, but He has not converted us all. There were men who

saw the open tomb of Lazarus, and yet were not convinced. There were men who saw God, and did not believe. Certainly, too, He multiplied the loaves of bread, and gave them to the multitudes to eat. But when He said : "He that eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, dwelleth in Me, and I in him," His disciples shrugged their shoulders, and turned away from Him, saying : "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" O my God, those who drank in Your words, those who touched Your garments, those who once heard that saying, some time between the morning and the evening of a real day, they were not drawn to You, but they went back and walked no more with You—You who spoke the only words that will never pass away! Men saw the Divine Body, which was about to rise again in glory and ascend to Heaven for all Eternity, men were living and breathing on that day greater than all other days

when the worlds were trembling in expectation of the Redemption. And He whom the pagan centuries had desired, never ceased to be that "Sign which shall be spoken against" of which the Gospel tells us. For needs must be that "there was a division among the people because of Him."

Yes, Lord, Your Beloved Disciple was right. It was necessary that the world should be divided about You, and that the mind of man should not be enslaved, but deep and free, able to give itself to You unreservedly. The gift of ourselves must be absolute. There must be love in us before we can receive Love. Of a truth, what You require is difficult, O my God, and Your demands are very heavy. There are many who ask nothing better than to follow You, and they are quite ready to make You concessions. But at last it is too much : there comes an hour when reason rebels, and even those of us

who have listened to You with patience, are forced to go away: these words are too hard, and we cannot hear them.

Go away? But no! We cannot. Where should we go, Lord? You alone have the words of eternal life. It must be that our heart is still too small. It must be that we have not yet deserved to know You. It must be that we cannot offer You a gift unshared by others—that we are not ready. . . .

Maxence, after the long day's rest, rises in the evening. Above him stretches the blue ocean of Divine Mercy. The West is illumined by Light from on high. In the East is the promise of the resurrection of the dead—and between East and West stands this man, this man of pain and longing. He stands between to-day and to-morrow, between the light which is and the light which shall be. . . . Ah, it is all too beautiful!

"I am longing for the spring," says this

man. "I am longing really to live at last. For the hour has come to put on the wedding-garment and to go back into the house of my soul, because now I know that there is something other than myself and yourself, because now I know that He is there, and that He cannot be mistaken. He is there, He who is not myself, nor this man nor that, and who is yet a Person, a Person infinite and yet distinct, a Person invisible and yet real—the only Person, in truth, who is real. The hour has come to open wide the door of my heart, because the Lord Jesus has spoken, and what man has ever said what He has said? I hear amazing words—I hear the Voice of the Eternal Word. How can I believe, and yet how can I not believe? Belief is difficult, but unbelief is still more difficult.

"Belief is difficult? But You Yourself have said so, Lord. You foresaw my weakness. Ah no! nothing will enter into this hard heart so long as the evil of the

world has a place in it—and can one, of a truth, serve two masters at the same time? I will wash myself, Lord, in the waters of salvation, and then I shall believe. I will be true, and I shall have the Truth. I will detest this past that torments me; I do detest it already with my whole heart, O my God, since only on this condition can I learn to know You. Already I recognise with joy the cool refreshing breath of the new life. The spirit that is within me has escaped from the toils of the hunter. It is free, it rises easily to the surface, like a cork which some hand had been holding at the bottom of a vessel, but which, now that it is released, lightly floats amid the airy bubbles. It is free to belong to You, this heart, if it pleases You to take it. It is floating, free, on those heavenly waters, those eternal waters, that are far removed from the corruption of the earth, and are all joy and peace and delightful freshness."

Some such words as these Maxence was singing in his heart as he made his way back to the black men who served under him. Ah! if a priest had happened to cross his path just then, his hand raised in the gesture of pardon, perhaps, that very evening . . . But no! The words of absolution will not be pronounced. Maxence is alone—no aid is to come to him from men.

"Wilt thou be made whole?" asks Jesus of the man who has suffered from an infirmity eight-and-thirty years. "Yes, Sir," he replies, "but I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool." I have no man! Certainly, I desire to be healed, but I have no man, and my voice is lost in the desert.

What are you doing, poor unhappy man, at the pool of Bethesda? Have you not recognised the Master? Only see! Your mere avowal of guilt, your regret

even, suffice Him, and already the saving words have been pronounced: "Arise, and walk!"

O my God, deign to look down upon this misery and this confidence. Have mercy on the man who has been sick for thirty years!

### III

#### The Time of Lilies

Maxence meets the Moors again—Description of his life at Ouaddan—The victors and the vanquished—“Our Father”—Towards the Sacred Heart of Jesus—He longs for a substantial food of the soul—Faith and works—The soldier falls on his knees.

MEANWHILE, Maxence is in receipt of constant communications informing him that important military operations would take place before the end of the year. “Get your beasts into good condition and ready for any eventuality,” the Governor of Adrar wrote to him. “The levy has now been duly made, but after all the fatigue entailed on your troop by the enmity of Sidina, and the difficulty of finding pasturage in the

desert zone into which he forced you to pursue him, I consider that your sole preoccupation should be to give your camels the maximum of rest and the maximum of food. Moreover, the season is now too far advanced for you to dream of . . . ”

One day, Maxence summoned the guides, and those officers of the native contingent most familiar with the region. They talked together for a time, spreading out upon the mat the big white sheets of paper on which were marked the names of the wells, with the lines of the various routes in red pencil. “I shall go to Ouaddan,” said Maxence, and he gave orders for a start next day.

The distance is not great from Douerat to Ouaddan. Maxence took five days to accomplish it. On the sixth day he encamped, deciding to cast anchor, as it were, for two months.

He has now arrived at one of the

boundaries of the desert. Here, there are still vast stretches covered with the plant *hâd*, where the camels can bask in the sunshine, but beyond are the untrodden sands, immense tracts of waterless desert, plains where it is death to man to venture. "I like this spot," says the commander. "It is a land that suggests noon, a land exactly suited to the thirsty month of August. It lies as though protected under a bell-glass. And really, nothing ever looked more parched than these curious desert flowers. One feels that a little water would kill them, that it is their nature to crumble away under the day's dust. . . . O land that hast seen me grow to spiritual maturity, land of summer and of perfect inner satisfaction, I greet thee! Ye too I greet, grasses clothing the last headland on which life can find a foothold, last witnesses to the living breath of earth! And ye, sands of the West that we shall never know! . . ."

And now began for Maxence a succession of long and peaceful days. Since he had caught a glimpse at Douerat of the law that governed his spiritual progress, his heart was filled with calm confidence, and thrilling with mysterious joy. Early in the morning, he would issue forth from his tent, and take a long walk over the trackless plains by which he was surrounded, conscious only of the strength of his youth and of his complete mastery over himself. Sometimes, on his way back to the camp, he would pause for a few minutes at the wells. Three or four Moors were drawing water, and at the same time uttering hoarse cries. Camels were drinking, and the shouts of the herdsmen dominated every other sound. Maxence would shut his eyes, stunned by his walk and by the blazing sunshine, and also by this life in the midst of which he found himself—so pure, profound, and solemn. He forgot in a moment all the

ugliness of the world that he had known. Nothing existed for him any more except the noble simplicity of the nomad tribes, their perfect distinction of manners, and gentle pastoral existence—that primitive ebullition of human life familiar to all who have known Africa.

Once more within his tent, the young officer devoted himself to all the duties incident to his command, either drawing up some report, or holding an audience, or settling some detail in connection with the territory which had been entrusted to his authority. But the afternoon hours were the sweetest of all. Then, he gave himself up to the long silence of the siesta, and to the contemplation of the Word of God as engraved upon the flaming monstrance of the sky. What power could now prevent the realisation of the promise? Poor worm of earth as Maxence was, utterly and entirely destitute, already he was beginning to experience

something of the intense happiness of possession—in the measure, for example, in which the souls in Purgatory may be said to possess God, by very reason of their ardent desire for Him. Of a truth, this soul, suffering the blessed torment of a burning desire for God, experienced all the pains and joys of Purgatory. The fire by which she was consumed, the horrible earthly disease of sin which alone separated her from Heaven, the weight of exile, the blazing heat of Africa—all these combined to make for her a place of waiting and of purification. But already Maxence felt within him a certain happiness, because he had turned aside from the common paths—those paths bereft of hope in which the cowardly and the mediocre are groaning—and because through the darkness he could perceive Jesus in the distance, Jesus not yet possessed, but desired.

Sometimes, he would take the Book

of the Gospels into his feverish hands. Then the radiance that streamed from Jesus came nearer to him. He would read, seeing only doubt and contradiction. And then, at a given point, the Divine utterance would suddenly stand out, so clear, concise, and forcible, that Maxence would tremble in all his limbs—so *hard* too sometimes, since, O my God, we must employ the same expression used by Your disciples. Yes, so hard and so uncompromising, so true and so deep, that it sweeps away for ever all miserable human objections—so hard, because a God is speaking, so gentle, because a Man is speaking, so hard and so gentle, firm and flexible as steel, in substance so simple and of such deep import, that once having heard it, nothing else can ever satisfy the mind and heart again.

"Ah! Beauty in itself is nothing," said Maxence. "But that Beauty should come to us from so great a distance, should be

so amazing, should have so absolute an authority over heavenly things—that is everything. It seems to me that it is my brother speaking to me, and behold it is Jesus, transfigured, who has just parted from Elias upon Mount Tabor! Then again, I think I have before me a beggar, bespattered with mud and spittle, and lo, it is the King of Heaven in all His incomparable pomp! Or I believe my friend is with me, a man like myself, and suddenly I am confronted by Him who made the worlds, and all the Angels of Heaven are hastening to wait upon Him."

This incomparable history that Maxence was reading, was, he understood, the completion of all human history. It closed the cycle, it recounted everything, from the birth of man to his death, right on up to the final coming of Jesus in glory on the Last Day. This history belongs to Time by reason of the humanity of Jesus, and it lies outside Time by reason of His

Divinity. Reading it, Maxence felt that he was at the centre of all things, at the very pivot of the world, in the heart of the drama, midway between the Fall and the Judgment. Everything is settled, everything is closed, the accounts have been balanced, and correctly balanced. Justice is made perfect in Mercy. Man needs God : Jesus gives God to man by giving Himself. A holy humanity needs sanctity : Jesus appears and gives it. Absolute continuity is re-established. Jesus maintains the world in its true balance ; He is the fulfilment of all that is human and all that is Divine ; He is the Link that was wanting, the Link between the Old and the New Covenant ; in Him man and God meet, and this unique meeting has generated the spark of Charity. For, without Jesus—that is to say, without a Mediator—there can be no movement on the part of man towards God, and therefore no Charity. And before the coming

of Jesus, bodies existed and minds existed, but there was not Charity. And since the coming of Jesus, there are bodies, and there are minds at an infinite distance from bodies, and there is Charity at an infinite distance from minds. Jesus, being all that God could possibly do for man, has given us all that is necessary. He Himself has been absolute Satisfaction, because He has satisfied God, and He has satisfied man. Jesus is everything that before was wanting.

Arrived at this point, Maxence let the book fall. "Ah, how consoling it must be," he cried, "to read the Gospel as a Christian!" The cry came from his very heart, and was the saddest and the sincerest that he had ever uttered. To read as a Christian—that means, to read quite otherwise than as he reads; to know as a Christian; that means, to know quite otherwise than as he knows. He has passed out of the order of the body into

the order of the mind ; there remains the order of Charity—but here Jesus Himself is necessary, no longer in His written Word, but in His Flesh ; no longer as a Memory, but as a Presence. Maxence has passed out of the obscurity of matter into the radiance of the intellect—a great and splendid radiance, assuredly. But there is a radiance of another kind, although human language can find no special term for it, and that is the radiance of Charity. Maxence sees the things of God with the eyes of the mind, but they have quite a different aspect viewed in the light of Charity. Then there is not the slightest mental reservation, not the least anxiety, nor the crafty hesitation of a man who does not feel quite easy ; there is only the peace of perfect knowledge, the serene consciousness of possession, a blissful certainty.

Intellectual knowledge is not rare, it is the light which “lighteth every man that

cometh into the world." But the knowledge that proceeds from Charity is infinitely rare, and this sets it at an infinitely greater distance from the mind than the mind is from the body. And Maxence himself was infinitely farther removed from Charity than he was from the body, while all his intellectual enlightenment and penetration did not equal one least little spark of Charity. Ah ! happy and blessed are those who, through the grace of the Sacraments, have entered the gardens of supernatural knowledge ! Happy and blessed are those who rest in the Heart of their God, and warm themselves at the furnace of His love ! Happy, for ever happy, are those for whom all Heaven is in the little Host, which is the exact measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. . . .

One morning, Maxence, with some of his comrades, ventured into the sand-dunes of Ouaran, which are on the thresh-

old of the great desert. The hoofs of the camels sank into the shifting soil. The east wind blew caressingly over the dunes, raising an almost imperceptible wreath of sand which floated on the vague horizon. Maxence felt at a long, long distance from everywhere, in a place that could not possibly exist, and yet that somehow did exist. They rode for an hour. Then the tufted tops of some palms showed themselves above a cupola of sand. It was a diminutive grove of palm-trees, curiously huddled within some crumbling walls.

“El-Hassen!” said the guide.

It came as a surprise. An aged man was there, the guardian of these unexpected palm-trees. This old captive, absolutely deaf and very infirm, brought the travellers delicious dates, and some fresh but rather salt water. Maxence, having eaten and drunk, leapt into his saddle, and rode straight ahead into the space before him.

Like a child on the shore of a dangerous sea, who is quite ready to trust himself to a walnut shell, so does Maxence tempt the dangerous waste, giving a bound forward, and then drawing rein in the scorching wind. Before him lies an extensive panorama of Africa. Towards the north-east, the guide is able to name Touijinit, but towards the west is a vast nameless expanse, which figures on the maps as blank white space, since any geography of the Sahara is impossible. The imagination leaps from dune to dune, flying forward on the back of the swift dromedary through endless days and nights, and always the landscape is exactly the same, always there is the same sand and the same sky. The throat is parched, the strength fails for want of water. But onward, onward! for the well is yonder—yonder, on the other side of Africa! . . . At least, O Maxence, there is nothing here to turn away your heart from its true country, nothing here

that will prevent you from gazing lovingly beyond the worlds in the direction of the Heavenly City. . . .

The guide pointed out a line of black rocks :

"The house of the Sheik Mohammed Fadel is there," said he. "But it is deserted to-day on account of the warriors from the north who used to come to pillage it."

Poor retreat of inoffensive philosophers ! Maxence hastens up to it ; he is delighted to enter a human dwelling-place, to set foot once again upon the shores of earth. An abandoned courtyard, ill protected by a low wall. At the far end of the courtyard, in the angle of the wall, the ruined house, low and wide—and it was here, in this very spot, that men used to dream of their God with intense vividness ! Maxence sits down among the ruins, and suddenly a strange depression overwhelms him. He is face to face with all the

weariness and stagnation of Islam, the bondage, the unutterable despondency, and the hopeless murmur of the slave, "What is the use of it?" And he thinks:

"I understand better now that we are the conquerors, and they the conquered. What have we more than they? I do not know. . . . Something that is both richer and truer, the consciousness of our worth and of our unworthiness. These two feelings are deeply rooted in us, they cannot deceive us, and only in the Mystery of Christianity do we find them reconciled. The knowledge that we are worth a high price, and yet that we are utter dirt—two facts seemingly contradictory yet equally certain, that are only reconciled in Jesus. The feeling of our power and of our impotence, the inward experience that we all possess of our strength and of our weakness, of our dependence and our independence—all is reconciled by Grace. The consciousness of our liberty and of our servi-

tude—two infinite joys, two poles each of infinite beatitude, between which all our actions oscillate. And hence the strength of the Christian : everything in him counts. All the elements that go to make up his soul are directed towards victorious action.

“What, then, have I in common with you—poor, unhappy men? What matters your faith to me, since you have not Charity—since there is no free outpouring of love in you, and you are only poor trembling slaves? Certainly, you know God, the All-Powerful and the Unique, but you do not know Him in Charity. You live in the world of pure ideas : you are not in the bondage of the flesh, but you are in the bondage of the mind. What, then, is your praise to me, since this true God whom you serve is not your Father—since your world is an open world, after the image of this desert, and each man dwells in it solitary and deserted, and other men are not his brothers? But

it is just because of this that your greatness breaks down. For we—we dwell in the sweet amity of Catholicism, and our world is as it were an enclosed world, and all men are our most dear brothers, and form with us a single family. And when we pray, we pray to Our Father, so true it is that we are children of the same Father.

"O infinitely great and joyful truth! God is Almighty, Holy, Just—but He is also the Father, He is Our Father, He is the Father who loves us, who trusts us, who wishes us to be free and happy. He is not merely a principle, or an idea, or a dogma, but He is Our Father and Our Friend, whom we see, and who is familiar to us—He is Our Father and Our Friend and Our Brother all in one. He is not a word or a myth, He is the Food of our souls. He is not Goodness, or Reason, or the Ideal, but He is a Person—Jesus Christ, the Mediator; Jesus Christ, the Second Person, yet very God; Jesus

Christ, true Man and true God ; Jesus Christ, God of Mercy and of Love. . . .”

These are cries of victory, yet, for all that, Maxence is conscious of a secret melancholy within him. Never, during all his solitary days, has he understood so well the brothers of his predilection, and never has the fact that he is separated from them grieved him more. He is forsaken, but he sees them on humble terms of friendship with their God. He is in the desert places of a reprobate land, and his thoughts turn towards that happy country on which rests the benediction of the Lord. He knows the true temple, and he cannot enter it ; the true law, and he cannot submit to it ; the true Sacrifice, and he cannot share in it.

Maxence feels sad because he is not with his brothers, and he thinks of them with love. With the eyes of his mind, he sees them entering a church, and crossing themselves, and making their way boldly

up the nave to where, in the shadow, they have caught a glimpse of the flicker of the little lamp that never will die out. O mystery! They are not alone. The Beloved is there, in the midst of them. Jesus is there, not in image nor in symbol, but in the flesh; the Master is there, really present, and He has recognised them, and they Him. He is there, in the Living Host, the same Jesus who rose again on the third day, and ascended into Heaven where He is seated at the right hand of the Father. This is the living God whom Maxence will adore—the God of his deliverance and of his love, the God who opened for him the gates of life.

Maxence longs for a substantial food to satisfy the craving of his soul. This is the bread that he demands. He desires to quench his thirst with the living waters of Truth. For him, there is no other road by which to go to God but Jesus. He maintains that either God does not exist,

or else that He is Jesus. He maintains that either God is nothing, or else that He is the God of the Christians—because many have borne testimony of Him, but among them are no philosophers and no scholars. . . . But who and what is He, this God of the Christians? He is Jēsūs, who made Himself known to us, who has loved us so deeply, and who has suffered so much for us—even to the death of the Cross; Jesus, glowing Furnace of Charity; Jesus, who in His love has revealed to us all the secrets of His Heart, and who is our reconciliation with Heaven and the Unique proof of the Most High; Jesus, the true Abyss of all Virtues, and the Object of the delight of all the Saints; Jesus, who gave Himself to us from the beginning of the world, who never ceases to offer Himself as a Victim for our sins, and who is our reason for trying to be good and pure; Jesus, who created Heaven and earth, and who has given His Body to

be crucified for us ; Jesus, Gate of Heaven and Desire of the Eternal Hills.

Maxence has no other reason for going to God except Jesus—no other reason, no other means. He can have no certainty outside Jesus, no desire beyond Jesus. And He can have no access to God except through Jesus, who is Himself God, and yet at the same time Man. . . . What then is he seeking, this pilgrim, and why do his eyes search the heavens? Lofty ideas? But all his life they have been offered to him in profusion. It is a Master that he seeks, a Master who will teach him what is true, and for this Master he will change his life, but not for a system nor the sounding brass of words. If, then, he should reject the testimony of the Ancient Law, the testimony of the Gospels, the testimony of St. Paul and that of St. Peter, the testimony of the Confessors and of the Martyrs, he will, by the self-same act, renounce all hope of the possession of

God and give himself up to the vain babblings of the world. If, on the other hand, he does not reject the testimony, but receives the Word of God, it is to Jesus that he will go, it is to Jesus that he will give himself. . . .

Have pity, O God, have pity on this heart that is still so frail! Lord, be merciful to this man, so poor and needy! But indeed it is not You who will turn him from the light. Ah no! it is not Jesus who turns anyone away from Jesus. It is evil, the flesh, the miserable ties that bind us to the world—it is everything that is not Jesus. It is all that is not You, O my God, which perhaps may turn him back. Therefore are we afraid, because the mind of man is weak, and You are hard to win, and mortal eyes are scarcely able to endure Your Light. Yet it is You who will take pity on this poor wanderer, You who will lead him safely into the happy regions of eternal bliss. . . .

Night has fallen upon Africa—a gentle, dreamless night. There are men astir in this night, who instinctively close up their ranks as the camels trot lustily forward. No sound, for the hoofs sink noiselessly into the soft sand. No words, for the men are so tired they are glad to be silent. The commander rides at the head of the column, bending over the neck of his camel, finding a certain pleasure in the very scent that rises to his nostrils, so unmistakably that of a wild beast.

The day has been a good day for him ; it has been hot, he has strolled and he has dreamed. And yet ! That awe-inspiring peace which came to him, that blessed Name which he repeated, that new heart beating, so he felt, within his breast—it is all untrue, it is only a mirage that tempts and frightens him. And Maxence knows no longer what to think : he is there in the night like some poor trembling man ; he is there like a beggar who has prayed

and prayed, and who now hopes no more. . . . This man does not believe. It is hard not to believe when one has learnt all there is to learn. It is hard, Lord, not to believe when You have spoken. But so it is : this man does not believe, he has tired God out, and there is nothing more to be done with him. In vain does he lift up his eyes towards the hills, since he does not even know the meaning of a noble, bold, and generous gift of oneself. There is nothing to be done with such a coward !

The vigil draws to an end, and Maxence trembles. . . .

‘ It happened that, about the same time, this soldier had a fancy to visit the well of Meïateg, for no Frenchman had as yet penetrated so far, and the name did not even appear upon the maps. One morning, then, towards ten o’clock, he arrived at a great bare tract of country with a thin crust over the ground, that crackled under

the camels' hoofs. On the left was a sand-hill, sparsely covered with bushes. A tragic spot, indicative of a hostile Nature! Near by, were the dark openings to the wells, disposed in a semicircle. Maxence experienced the uneasy feeling that he had seen all this before—that it was one of those eternal recurrences of things and of ourselves known to most of us; and he lived through, as it were, the exact rehearsal of the drama, the implacable return of hours similar to the past. He yawned. The guide led him towards the wells. All were dry save one, in which, at no great depth, was some stagnant black water. The atmosphere was heavy, charged with a hot and pungent vapour.

"I am thirsty," said Maxence. "Draw some water for me."

He turned round, and saw the guide make a grimace and point to something near the well. It was a corpse, half buried in the sand. The rotting flesh had

been torn away in parts. Here and there on the ground lay scraps of cloth.

"Look," said the guide, "this stranger was found at the edge of the well some days ago. It is thought that he came from Regueiba. Doubtless, he was exhausted by thirst, and in order to get water more quickly, he went down into the interior of the well, and there he died. Some people of Ouaddan who happened to pass, took out his body and buried it hastily in a shallow grave. And so the jackals came and dug him up and tore him, as you see."

Unexpected and disconcerting sight! Poor man, poor bare-legged traveller! For days and days, solitary and grimly resolute, he had pushed on through the ill-fated desert. He crossed circle after circle of the horizon, always a fresh circle rising up before him; and, as he left dune after dune behind, all his thoughts were bent upon this well which it was a

necessity for him to reach. At last, in the giant conflict with the sand, he conquers; he reaches the spring so ardently desired, and his life is about to be restored. But no, it is too late! The accursed desert will seize him after all!

And now Maxence, standing with outstretched arms in the unbreathable air, gazes down upon him: "O land of death!" he groans. "People of slaves! Afflicted race!" Then, turning to the Arab: "Come! Let us leave this place. I want to be at Ouaddan before the sun sets."

Under the palm-trees of Ouaddan the shade is kindly and gracious. Maxence would gladly rest in it—rest until death overtakes him. But he has been pierced by a cruel arrow, and wounded by the sharp point of pity. And so he stands looking sorrowfully down at all the misery of the world, his mouth bitter, his eyes

fixed and stony in his pain. As far as his gaze can reach, he sees nothing but death and defeat. In the ruins of Ouaran, in the charnel-house of Meïateg—everywhere, the gloomy, sterile madness of Islam has pursued him. But he himself—what is he, if not the vanquished and accursed? What is he, if not that same poor thirsty man who crossed the desert, that poor dead man who had delayed too long? And the voice within him says, mournfully and with tears :

“Ah yes! I feel compassion for those who are forsaken, who are sad. . . . But we, what have we done—we, the blessed of the Father, we, the children of election? And what shall we reply when the Judge says to us: ‘I had given you the most gracious of all lands, and you were My chosen children. I had given you My beloved France, and made you the heirs of My promise. It was of you that I thought in the Agony of Gethsemane, it

was to you that I gave the first place. There is nothing that I have not done for you, because for none have I so longed as for you. And I had chosen you from among many. . . .'

"Alas! what have we done? What unaccountable desire has seized us, what leprosy consumed us? It is true, Lord, we have not been faithful to the promise, we did not watch with You when You were entering upon Your Agony. But see! We are groaning with shame and with contrition, and we come to you just as we are, tear-stained and defiled. We have lost everything; we have nothing; but all that remains, O my God, we give to You—all that remains, that is, our broken, humbled heart. You are stronger than we are, Lord: we surrender. And we pray to You humbly as our fathers prayed to You. Very humbly, very abjectly, we beg for Your Grace, since only by Your help can we possess You. . . ."

That is all. Maxence has ceased to think. His head falls forward on his breast. Just as the ebbing tide recedes to the farthest limits of the shore, so everything has receded before this man, leaving him only with a sense of space, as though the mansions of his soul had grown immeasurably greater. Everything has vanished, nothing exists any more, and over all the world hangs a feeling of intense expectation. Then he who has struggled for so long surrenders. The fighter falls on his knees, hides his face in his hands, and says softly, like a traveller tired out after a long day's journey :

“ My God, I am speaking to You. Listen to me ! I will do everything to win You. Have pity on me, O my God. You know that I was never taught to pray to You, but I say to You now, as Your Son told us to say, I say to You with all the love of my heart, as my fathers said to You in the past : ‘ Our Father, who art

in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name . . .  
Thy Kingdom come . . . Thy will be  
done on earth as it is in Heaven. . . .”

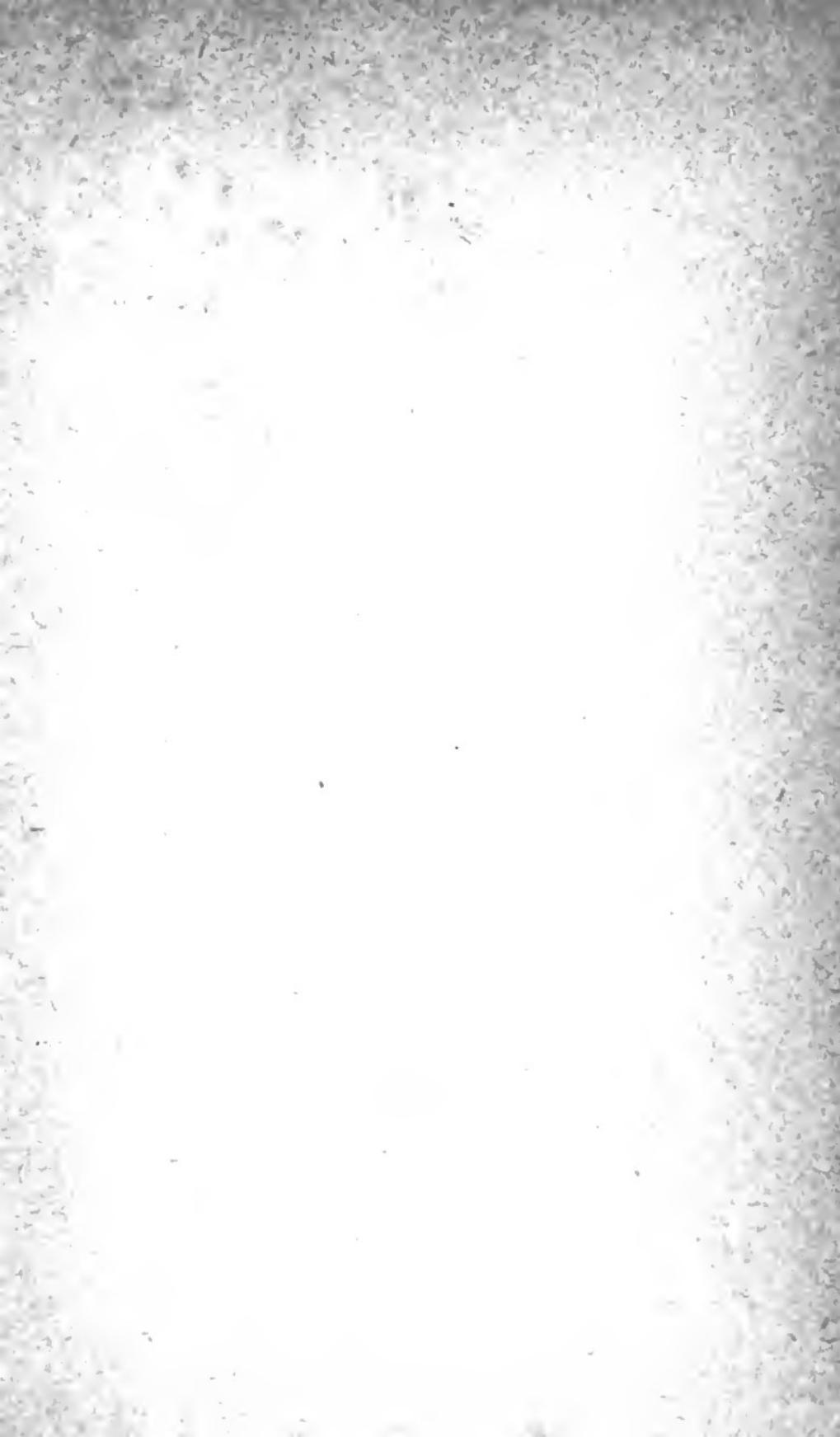
O tears, pronounced blessed by the third Beatitude, tears of joy and peace, tears of relief that what was lost is found, and that it is now possible to begin again, flow down over this sorrowful countenance! Come to the aid of this trembling voice, and of these lips that falter because they are so ignorant and the words so new to them! But even as Maxence hesitates, the wonderful sentences are borne to him on the wings of the Dove of the Spirit, from out the depths of the early ages, and from the very bosom of Eternity. And his voice grows stronger, more insistent:

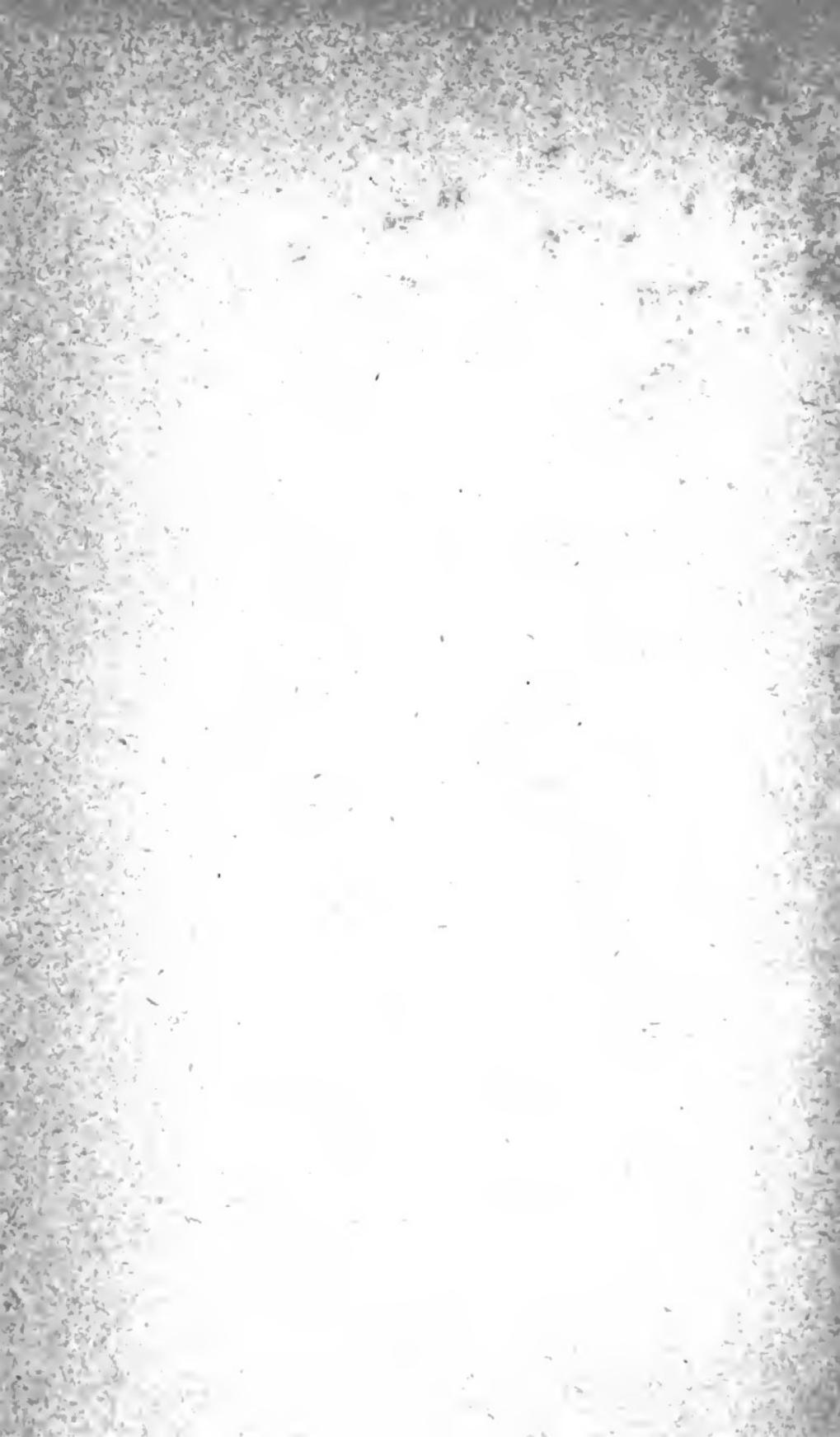
“ ‘ Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.’ ”

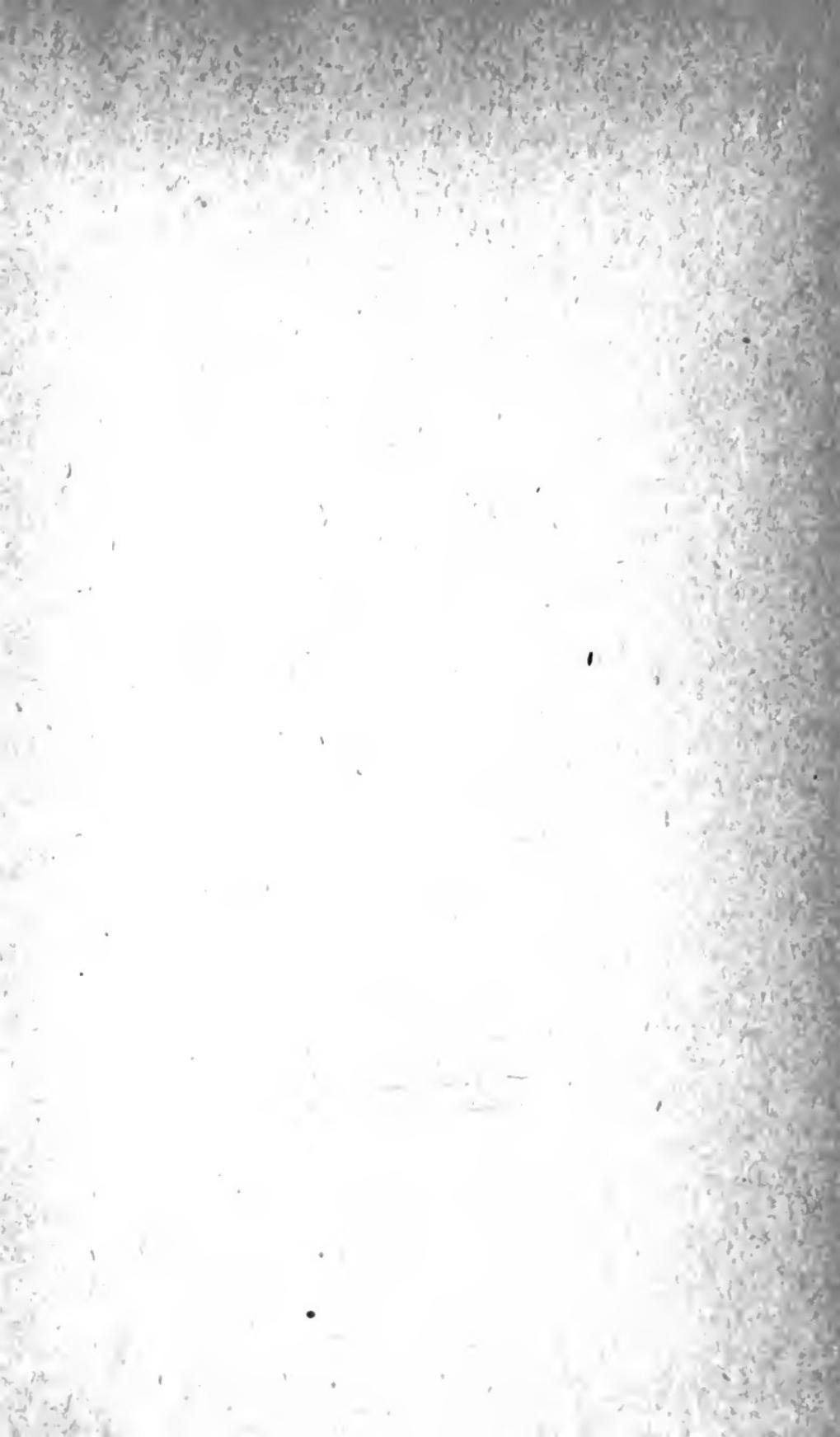
How beautiful it is, the first prayer! How blessed and how precious in the sight of God! With what joy do the Angels listen to it! And now, poor man, arise! Jesus is not far off; He is coming, for He cannot long delay. Already you are able to gaze tranquilly at the land of your reconciliation and the evening that has brought you consolation. Go on your way. And hope—hope on, out of the fulness of your heart, and with all the strength of your renewed youth, and all other things shall be added unto you. . . .

“Why, Lord! is it, then, so simple to love You?”

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